

ELECTIONS ARE NOT A DEMOCRACY MAKE

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ABSTRACT

“Democracy” means “rule by the people.” However, this definition omits essential parts of the idea of democracy as practiced in many societies. The principal purposes for which people establish democratic government are; protection, promotion of their rights, interests, welfare. Meaning each individual should be free to participate in society’s political self-government. Democracy is however characterized by a number of factors, one being holding of elections. Democracy has four key elements: a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; active participation of the people as citizens, in politics, civic life; Protection of human rights of all citizens; a rule of law where laws, procedures apply equally to all citizens. Political scientists have argued that African elections are, in simple terms, window-dressing rituals with no real political meaning other than stuffing of the ballot boxes behind closed doors. The paper therefore, argues that ‘elections are not a democracy make’ in themselves.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, elections, rights, liberalism, constitutionalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a contested notion. It is largely accepted that there is no perfect end state democracy, and such an idea has been abandoned. Some have argued that the word ‘democracy’ is “debased currency” applied so frequently to questionable regimes that it connotes very little substantively¹. It remains ambiguous and disputed even in contemporary times. At the heart of endeavours to measure and evaluate democracy lies the debate over its definition. Some scholars have argued that the holding of elections can be equated with democracy^{2,3} while others have later countered that additional criteria are needed to qualify a polity as democratic^{4,5,6}. One of the most important policy instruments today underlining democracy, is the governance through participation, consultation and dialogue through exchange of ideas and best alternatives.

¹ Schmitter, P C & Karl, T. L. (1993), ‘What democracy is...and is not’, in L Diamond & M F. Plattner (ed.) The global resurgence of democracy, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.

² Huntington, S. (1991), The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

³ Schumpeter, J. (1962), Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, Harper and Row, New York (first published in 1947).

⁴ Crick, B. (1998), ‘A meditation on democracy’, in T Inoguchi, N Edward & J Keane (ed.), The changing nature of democracy, United Nations Press, Tokyo, pp. 255-265.

⁵ Inoguchi, T, Newman, E & Keane, J (1998), ‘Introduction: The Changing Nature of Democracy’, in T Inoguchi, E Newman & J Keane (ed.), The changing nature of democracy, United Nations Press, Tokyo, pp. 1-19.

⁶ Diamond, L. (1996), ‘Is the third wave over?’ Journal of Democracy, 7(3), viewed 12 May, 2006, http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/journal_of_democracy/v007/7.3diamond.html.

Strengthening the relationship between government and citizens has a clear priority for today's democracies. The right of the public to participate in governance is included in the basic human rights guaranteed by international documents, of which most important are: "Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Convention on Civil and Political Rights, European Convention on Human Rights. Therefore, this paper argues that elections are not a democracy make in themselves despite holding them periodically

2. DEMOCRACY

There is a broad agreement that democracy sweeps the world in waves and reverse waves, in spite of the discord over the criteria for democracy. This description was put forward by Samuel Huntington in his book *The Third Wave* in 1991, and has been widely used since. He pinpoints the beginning of the third wave of democracy as Portugal's transition in 1974. Huntington (1991 p.9)⁷ adheres to an electoral definition of democracy, writing, "Elections, open, free, and fair, are the essence of democracy, the inescapable sine qua non". This statement concisely summarizes the approach of many observers in the mid-1980s to early 1990s who used elections as the exclusive criterion of democracy. This definition was espoused earlier by Joseph Schumpeter in his seminal 1947 book, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*. He wrote that democracy is a system "for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" (p.269). In fact democracy was inevitable. Contemporary political philosopher Francis Fukuyama⁸ in his book, *The End of History and the Last Man*, argued that the progression of human history will end with the world settling on the ideology of liberal democracy that spells the eventual triumph of political and economic liberalism. According to him more and more governments in the future will use the framework of parliamentary democracy and that will also contain markets of some sort.

By the mid-1990s some researchers argued that the third wave of democracy had crested (Diamond 1996)^{9,10}. It was optimistically proclaimed by the United Nations and government agencies of Western countries as early as the late 1980s that there were more democracies than at any time previously¹¹. The basis for this claim was an increase in the number and frequency of elections throughout the world. Elections were used as the benchmark in defining who had attained membership in the democratic 'club'. The Human Development Report 2002 by UNDP indicated that, "[I]n the 1980s and 1990s the world made dramatic progress in opening up political systems and expanding political freedoms. Some 81 countries took significant steps towards democracy, and today 140 of the world's nearly 200 countries hold multiparty elections more than ever before".

Democracy is a broad term and there seems to be a lot of confusion about what the word Democracy means. In spite of the fact that at least in some parts of the world one can hear it from the media every day. Democracy by definition means government by the people. That means that all the people should be able to have their say in one way or another in everything that affects their lives¹². Dictionaries usually say that this right can either be exercised directly (by all members of a community having the possibility to enter personally, without mediators, their

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8 Fukuyama, F. (1992), *The End of History and the Last Man*, The Free Press, New York.

9 Carothers, T. (2004), 'Democracy's sobering state', *Current History*, December.

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11 Carothers, T. (2002), 'The end of the transition paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, 13(1), pp.5-21.

12 Beetham, David. 1993. "Liberal Democracy and the Limits Democratization" in Held, David (ed). *Prospects for Democracy*; North, South, East, West. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 55-73.

position on a particular issue into the decision making process - modern technology is able to provide this possibility for increasingly larger and larger communities), or through representatives (members of legislative bodies). This second arrangement is then called Representative Democracy. Representative democracy would be fine if the representatives would really make all their decisions only after consulting their constituencies. In the least, after having a clear idea about the views of their constituents on a particular issue, and trying to accommodate these views as best as possible (or postpone the decisions until an overwhelming majority of the constituents would be happy with them).

Democracy may be a word familiar to most, but it is a concept still misunderstood and misused at a time when dictators, single-party regimes, and military coup leaders alike assert popular support by claiming the mantle of democracy. Yet the power of the democratic idea has prevailed through a long and turbulent history, and democratic government, despite continuing challenges, continues to evolve and flourish throughout the world¹³. Mostly, there exist a misconception on the concept of democracy because people's focus is only on the act of holding elections defining the existence of a democratic regime.

As Zakaria¹⁴ notes, "If a democracy does not preserve liberty and law, that it is a democracy is a small consolation." Scholars charged, that elections were being used to legitimize semi-authoritarian regimes rather than serving as a genuine expression of the will of the people. Even contemporary references are made to the rise of democracy in the face of a large number of hybrid regimes – based on the criterion of elections¹⁵.

Most countries in the world regard periodic and regular elections as a core attribute of democracy. In 2016, a total of 132 elections were held worldwide in presidential, legislative or local contests¹⁶. Unfortunately, a vast majority of countries that call themselves Representative Democracies are not true democracies according to the Abraham Lincoln's definition (rule by the people, for the people and of the people). Most of them (countries) are actually just Elected Dictatorships. People can vote usually only once every four or five years, but they do not vote on any issues and this trend has seemingly continued. They just elect their so called representatives who then until the next elections have no obligations by law and little incentives to base their decisions on individual issues on the wishes on their electorate. Samuel is of the view that people hardly ever bother to consult them on their stands on various issues. Therefore, legislative bodies composed of such "representatives" act in a very dictatorial manner between the elections¹⁷.

However, in some cases people are willingly to provide the checks and balances in all the operations of the government but the political environment does not support them. Most of the citizens end up being victimized and face the consequences. The only country that is quite close to the definition of Democracy is Switzerland (more or less since 1291). From this definition and description of democracy and its applicability shows that elections by themselves do not justify democracy, this is because even after holding elections in several so called democratic countries, these leaders still behave as elected dictators who have little or no obligations at all in consulting the electorates before making decisions. Such is the case in most African countries. Furthermore,

13 [photos.state.gov/.../Democracy-in-Brief_kor.pdf](https://photos.state.gov/libraries/indonesia/2016/00000001-0000-0000-0000-000000000000/Democracy-in-Brief_kor.pdf)

14 Zakaria, F. (1997), 'The rise of illiberal democracy', Foreign Affairs, November, p. 22-43.

15 UNDP, (2002), Human Development Report 2002: Deepening democracy in a fragmented world, Oxford University Press, New York.

16 IDEA, The Global State of Democracy (2017). Exploring Democracy's Resilience (Stockholm: International IDEA, 2017), <<http://www.idea.int/gsod>>—, Voter Turnout Database, 2017, <<http://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/voter-turnout>>, accessed 21 July 2017.

17 Huntington, Samuel P. (2009) "How Countries Democratize." Political Science Quarterly, vol. 124, no.1 (Spring 2009).

Huntington (1991)¹⁸ observes that by 1990 electoral observation was standard practice for transitional countries wishing to establish democratic legitimacy. Andreas Schedler (2006)¹⁹ terms these cases electoral authoritarianism, which are located between electoral democracy and closed autocracy. Most of the countries are considered electoral authoritarian regimes that play the game of multiparty elections by holding regular elections. Yet they violate the liberal-democratic principles of freedom and fairness so profoundly and systematically as to render elections instruments of authoritarian rule rather than ‘instruments of democracy’²⁰.

Democracy’ as it is used colloquially typically refers to liberal democracy as it has manifested in Western countries. As both Dahl and Zakaria²¹ noted, most western democracies first liberalized, establishing the rule of law and expanding civil rights, then opened the political arena more broadly in the form of political rights and participation. Therefore, DEMOCRACY basically means rule OF THE PEOPLE, FOR THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE, but now today the acts and governance systems of the current leaders are defining democracy as the rule OFF THE PEOPLE, FAR FROM THE PEOPLE, and BUY THE PEOPLE. This is the democracy that is prevailing in most of the so called democratic countries. Democracy is OFF the people, FAR from the people and BUY the people meaning people are not involved in decision making. Africa generally finds itself in such a definition of democracy which in a way implies bad governance and results into abuse of public resources. Africa as a continent has reached the levels of having leaders that cannot present their political ideologies and accept critics from the public. In most cases people are bought during the campaigns with little give away gifts and this happens mostly due to the failure in understanding the meaning of good governance by the masses. There is therefore need for more understanding of the civic right and how this must be used among most citizens.

On the contrary, Beetham (1993:55)²² is of the view that the concept of democracy, in its simplest form, was defined using the two Greek words demos (people) and kratos (rule) that combine to make the word democracy, meaning “rule by the people”. This is the classical idea of democracy. Beetham elaborates this concept as a “mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control, and the most democratic arrangement to be that where all members of the collective society enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision making directly - one, that is to say, which realizes to the greatest conceivable degree the principles of popular control and equality in its exercise...”.

With the unfolding of democracy in most poor countries especially those in Africa, there tends to be a general agreement among political scientists that one of the essential components in a healthy democracy is the existence of an enduring opposition that critically checks the day-to-day activities of the ruling party^{23, 24}. In fact, the ruling parties attempt to run the government so as to defend their record and win public approval, knowing that if they fail to do so they may lose

20 Schedler, A. (2006), The Logic of Electoral Authoritarianism, in A Schedler (ed.), Electoral Authoritarianism: The Dynamics of Unfree Competition, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Boulder CO, pp. 1-23.

21 Dahl, R. A. (1971), Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition, Yale University Press, New Haven.

23 Kiiza, J. (2005). The role of opposition parties in a democracy. Paper presented at the Regional Conference on Political Parties and Democratisation in East Africa, Tanzania.

24 Ionescu, G. and de Madariaga, I. (1968). Opposition: past and present of a political institution. London: Penguin Books.

office. However, in most cases in Africa, ruling governments do not allow opposition political parties to check their day to day activities and they limit their freedoms of expression, association and movements. These are the new democracies which are opposed to the more established ones (democracy), and are by definition fragile in the sense that they are not formally constituted and are less experienced²⁵.

On the other hand, in the established democracies, alternative electoral systems result from the choice by political parties which is predictably based on each alternative system's expected effects, both immediate and long-term, on their electoral self-interests²⁶. In emerging democracies, on the contrary, what form of electoral system is most appropriate for the consolidation of democratic rule is rarely debated among political leaders, electoral administrators and civil society elements²⁷. In fact, particularly in Africa, Rakner and Svåsand (2007:6)²⁸ made it clear that unlike more established democratic systems, we observe that while the electoral formula impacts on the form of representation of parties in the legislature, other factors, like the importance of presidential rule, the regional distribution of voters, and manipulation of constituency design also impact on party representation and contribute to the observed dominance of one party.

Furthermore, Kohn²⁹ pointed out that in fragile democracies, the military has 'been deeply involved in politics, sometimes preying on society rather than protecting it.' In fact, especially in Africa, the ruling party attempts to guarantee a loyal and pliable military through a biased system of recruitment, reward and deprivation in order to ensure its political longevity^{30,31}. For instance, during the run-up to the Zimbabwean elections of 28 March 2008, General Constantine Chiwenga, the Commander of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces by then, outright declared that his troops 'will not respect any president other than Robert Mugabe'³². Mugabe didn't not realize that the same military that easily recognized his presidency in 2008 were able to ease out his presidency after decrying deteriorating socio-economic conditions, stacking the courts with its cronies, pretending to be above the fray and arranging rigged elections. The above scenario was proved right when on 14 November 2017, armed military personnel from the Zimbabwe Defence Forces invaded the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation studios in Harare before Major General Sibusiso Moyo came out on a live television broadcast declaring that the army had activated an operation that would later be known as "Operation Restore Legacy.

2.1. Elections

Election are defined as a process where citizens vote to elect officials to office or vote on bills and amendments trying to be passed. Modern representative democracy has functioned on this

25 Pridham, G. and Lewis, P. (1996). Stabilising fragile democracies and party system development. In G. Pridham and P. Lewis (eds), *Stabilizing fragile democracies: comparing new party systems in southern and eastern Europe*. London: Routledge.

26 Benoit, K. (2004). Models of electoral system change. *Electoral Studies*, 23:363–389.

27 Barkan, J., Densham, P. and Rushton, G. (2006). Space matters: designing better electoral systems for emerging democracies. *American Journal of Political Science*, 50(4):926– 939.

29 Kohn, R. (2001). How democracies control the military. In L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The global divergence of democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

30 Bratton, M. and Van de Walle, N. (1997). *Democratic experiments in Africa: regime transition in comparative perspective*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

31 Monga, C. (1999). Eight problems with African politics. In L. Diamond and M. Plattner (eds), *The global divergence of democracies*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

32 UN Integrated Regional Information Networks 2008:1

system since the 17th century³³. Based on this elections are therefore formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. Elections have been the usual mechanism by which modern representative democracy has operated since the 17th century. Elections were used as early in history as ancient Greece and ancient Rome, and throughout the Medieval period to select rulers such as the Holy Roman Emperor and the Pope ("Election (political science),"³⁴.

2.2. Elections are not a democracy make

Election is the process of choosing leaders by voting which by itself as a process, does not make a democracy, democracy goes beyond just this process of choosing leaders, as there are lot of democratic expectations from those that are chosen by the people. However, the fact that democracy includes elections does not mean elections on their own are a democracy make but rather democracy goes beyond as those people that are elected must operate under strong institutions, observe the rule of law, must be representative to the people that chose them, must ensure freedoms and above all there must be a smooth transfer of power during and after elections.

Nevertheless, in as much as elections help define democracy as a feature, principle or characteristic of the latter, elections by themselves do not justify a democracy. Democracy is a bigger concept that has a lot of characteristics and defining features/principles for its existence or occurrence. The principle of free and fair elections has been at the core of recent United States foreign policy. It also is the definition of democracy in the minds of many people around the world. To many, such elections in a country stand for, or are equivalent with democracy. While recognizing real politik, the secret of promoting democracy around the world really lies in one's definition of democracy³⁵.

Furthermore, Makinda³⁶ held that, generally, democracy can be seen 'as a way of government firmly rooted in the belief that people in any society should be free to determine their own political, economic, social, and cultural systems.' More commonly, the concept of democracy is used to describe a political system designed to widen the participation of ordinary citizens in the governance process with clearly defined and limited powers. Free and fair elections are a necessary, but not sufficient condition of democracy. Enthusiastic and unquestioned support of elections without the necessary groundwork can lead to unpleasant surprises. Abraham Lincoln had it right when he defined democracy as government of the people, by the people and for the people. In other words, there is a lot more to democracy than holding elections and this can be seen in the following steps to a democratic society:

Firstly, a society must have in place or intend to build institutions that allow its citizens on a daily basis to participate in all aspects of the political process. Secondly, a democratic society must guarantee that all people are equal before the law. That, in turn, demands an independent judiciary. Thirdly, a true democracy acknowledges and respects all cultural, ethnic or religious differences that may exist within its borders. Fourthly, freedom of expression/opinion without fearing repercussions from those who have been elected is also critical. Of course, there is also the true purpose of government, and this is to do its best to sustainably, responsibly and transparently serve the people in an effort to improve their standards of living in an equitable

33 <http://www.brookings.edu/governance.aspx>

34 Encyclopaedia Britannica Online. Retrieved 18 August 2018.

35 www.theglobalist.com/elections-do-not-make-democracy

36 Makinda, S. 1996. Democracy and multiparty politics in Africa. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 34(4):555–573.

manner³⁷. One thing is for sure: Elections alone do not define democracy. In other words, holding elections in a democratic void can easily lead to outcomes that might in the end undermine the goal of achieving democracy itself³⁸.

According to *Hisham*³⁹ the history of liberal democracy in the West in general and the United States in particular shows that democratization is a long process, and that it can be messy and at times destabilizing, because there will always be forces in society that resist some of the basic tenants of democracy and its habits and traditions.

Elections are a necessary component but not a sufficient condition for democracy or more specifically a liberal democracy. A modern democracy cannot exist without free, fair and transparent elections, but elections alone are not a democracy make (Huntington and Samuel, 2009). Democracy is a system of checks and balances, separation of powers, a constitution that respects and protects basic civil and political rights and freedoms such as freedom of expression and assembly, the right to form political parties, the civilian control of the military, a free press, and an independent judiciary.

However, in Africa where most states are undeniably plural societies marked by deep cleavages among a diversity of ethnic groups⁴⁰, elections seem to provide the opportunity to legitimize the political and economic pre-eminence of one group, to reward supporters of that group and compel them to adopt greater political conformity, and to re-impose a firm hand on challenging elements within or outside that group⁴¹. In other words, they seem to merely represent an artificial exercise the results of which are instinctively manipulated by a ruling party in order to prevent opposition political parties winning elections despite the fact that citizens might courageously vote for change (Monga 1999:51; Bratton & Van de Walle 1997:234–235)⁴².

Broadly, elections are just administrative formalities which have become standard signs of good conduct adopted by African governments to Western states and international institutions on which they are financially and politically dependent⁴³. Doubts have even sprung up whether multiparty systems are altogether appropriate to the highly divided societies of Africa (Young 1993:301), and cynicism has won the day with contentions that, in Africa, ‘a flawed election may be preferable to no election at all’⁴⁴. More expressively, Chabal⁴⁵ has written that multiparty competition has not improved accountability, with the exception of Botswana and most notably the island states of Cape Verde and Mauritius, and that it has not led to more sustained economic development.

In a true democracy, the rule of law, democratic political institutions, and independent civil society organizations help ensure respect for electoral outcomes. These institutions and values in

37 <http://www.brookings.edu/governance.aspx>

38 www.theglobalist.com/elections-do-not-make-democracy.

39 english.alarabiya.net/en/views/news/middle-east/2014/04/...

40 Erdmann, G. and Basedau, M. (2007). Problems of categorizing and explaining party system in Africa. German Institute for Global Area Studies Working Paper no. 40.

41 Young, T. 1993. Elections and electoral politics in Africa. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 63(3): 299–312.

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43 Adejumo, S. (2000). Elections in Africa: a fading shadow of democracy? *International Political Science Review*, 21(1):59–73.

44 Anglin, D. (1998). International election monitoring: the African experience. *African Affairs*, 97(389):471–495.

45 Chabal, P. (2001). Can democracy prevent conflicts in Africa? Paper presented at the Bergen Seminar on Development, Norway.

turn bolster people's faith in their governments and their willingness to support peaceful political transitions⁴⁶. However, the opposite is taking place in most African countries. Elections are always petitioned in most Africa countries which is a sign that people have lost faith in the electoral bodies. This is a sign that the type of elections held in most so called democratic countries is in simpler terms, a window-dressing rituals with no real political meaning other than the stuffing of the ballot boxes behind closed doors.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Democratic elections are widely recognized as a foundation of legitimate government. By allowing citizens to choose the manner in which they are governed, elections form the starting point for all other democratic institutions and practices. Genuine democracy, however, requires substantially more. In addition to elections, democracy requires constitutional limits on governmental power, guarantees of basic rights, tolerance of religious or ethnic minorities, and representation of diverse viewpoints, among other things. To build authentic democracy, societies must foster a democratic culture and rule of law that govern behavior between elections and constrain those who might be tempted to undermine election processes. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton remarked at Georgetown University, "Democracy means not only elections to choose leaders, but also active citizens and a free press and an independent judiciary and transparent and responsive institutions that are accountable to all citizens and protect their rights equally and fairly. Elections are not a democracy make by themselves, however they are crucial to democracy. Elections must not be used as the only reflections to democracy but rather used as a cornerstone to instil democratic principles. Elections determine the presence of democracy but not a democracy in itself. Electoral systems must not only be seen to be free and fair but must also be framed to adequately reflect voters' preferences.

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