

# DEMOCRACY OR LIBERAL AUTOCRACY; THE CASE OF AFRICA

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The state of democracy in Africa continues to be one of the most controversial and difficult questions facing the continent today. While African regimes are more liberal than their authoritarian predecessors, they have a profound flaw. The African governments have increasingly adopted important aspects of constitutional liberalism necessary for democracy to flourish and includes rule of law, private property rights, separation of powers and free speech and assembly. However, the results of such democratic initiatives have not bore the intended fruits as the continent continue to witness outright reversals of democracy. For instance, elections are becoming a means of power preservation and a large number of countries have very low levels of democratic quality. This paper, therefore, seeks to examine this dire state of democracy in Africa to inform discussions on why African governments should be regarded as a Liberal Autocracies and not democratic.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Liberal Autocracy, Democracy, Authoritarian, Liberalism, constitutionalism, rights.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

According to Jackson & Rosberg (1985), "The most important fact about democracy in Africa is that it is unusual, however, in many countries it is almost unknown". Africa, like most of the world today and in times past, is predominately non-democratic. Therefore, African states, in the classical terms of Aristotle, would be viewed to be much closer to autocracy or oligarchy than to democracy (Jackson & Rosberg, 1985). However, the optimistic long-term scenario presupposes that democracy remains the goal that African countries are seeking and it depends on it being viewed both as the global standard of political legitimacy and as the best system for achieving the kind of prosperity and effective governance that almost all countries seek (Plattner, 2015). The third wave of democratization experienced in the 1990s ushered in a new age of constitutionalism, rule of law, multiparty elections, and civil liberties in Africa. However, it was not sustained for long and today democracy is largely a flawed process in most African countries with major reversals appearing frequently in every region (Yates, 2013). Therefore, this paper seeks to elaborate on the concept of democracy and Liberal Autocracy and then critically evaluate the democratic trends in Africa to justify why Africa governments should be regarded as liberal Autocracies and not democratic.

## **2. DEMOCRACY**

It is often difficult to reach a consensus on the definition of democracy, no one definition will satisfy everyone as one man's democracy is another man's oligarchy, and vice versa (Jackson and Rosberg, 1985). However, some fairly straightforward and widely used concepts of democracy

will be useful for this paper. Therefore, the forthcoming definitions are not meant to stipulate a single meaning of democracy, but to expose its multiple meanings. Notably, the end of autocratic rule in Europe that commenced with Portugal's "Revolution of the Carnations" in 1974 and the end of communist regimes throughout Eastern Europe in 1989 produced a welcome convergence towards a universally accepted definition of democracy. (Schmitter and Karl, 1991). Political scientist Larry Diamond (2004), described democracy to consist of four key elements: (a) A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; (b) The active involvement of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; (c) Protection of the human rights of all citizens, and (d) A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens (Diamond, 2004). As such, for democracy to thrive, specific procedural norms must be followed and civic rights must be respected. Any polity that fails to impose such restrictions upon itself, that fails to follow the "rule of law" concerning its procedures, should be considered undemocratic. These methods alone do not define democracy, but their presence is indispensable to its persistence. (Schmitter and Karl, 1991).

Comparatively, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2017), defines democracy as a political system that is based on popular control and political equality. It considers democracy to be perfect and seeks to warranty equality and basic freedoms, empower everyday people, unravel disagreements through peaceable dialogue, recognize differences, and bring about political and social renewal without economic and social disruption. Hence, International IDEA's vast thinking of democracy encompasses greater than simply free elections; it has a couple of dimensions, which include civil and political rights, social and economic rights, democratic governance and rule of law (International IDEA, 2017). In the same fashion, while acknowledging that democracy consists of far more than elections (Karl, 1995), it should also be recognized that 'elections remain fundamental, not only for installing democratic governments but as a necessary requisite for broader democratic consolidation (Bratton, 1998). The idea in democracy reflects a core value enshrined in article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that the 'will of the people' is the basis for the legitimacy and authority of sovereign states. It displays a frequent and prevalent desire for peace, safety and justice. Democracy reflects the fundamental ethical principles of human equality and the dignity of persons and is thus inseparable from human rights. As such, the reconsideration of the democratization process should move away from what has been called 'Pro-forma democracy', in which 'formal citizens' are directed by so-called mass parties, single national parties, national liberation movements and the like, to act in particular ways defined and imposed by autocratic leaders. The actual democratic practice (or lack of it) of all those groups which claim to represent the voice or interests of 'the people' needs to be scrutinized (Imam, 1991)

Likewise, Robert Dahl argued that democracy is concerned with the process by which ordinary citizens exert a relatively high degree of control over leaders. Therefore, democracy must mean at a minimum have a significant share of the many in political decisions. Basic assumption has it that democracy is a matter of power and power-sharing (Dahl, 1971). Similarly, democracy should not be considered merely to state-defined rights and obligations. It requires identification of the elements of civil society and the factors which promote the autonomy of its actors such as the mass media, associations, social movements and the like (Imam, 1991). It is also important to note that there are eight frequently cited constitutional guarantees, necessary for the empirical realization of democratic responsiveness and they include, Freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, universal adult suffrage, the eligibility in principle of any citizen to seek public office, the right of political leaders to compete freely for votes and support, the existence of alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, electorally accountable government policymaking institutions (Dahl, 1971).

According to Ayesha (1991), democracy must include the right of people to live their aspirations and programmes, not only in political life but also in economic, cultural, religious and other aspects of life. In other words, democracy includes ending the crisscrossing networks of oppression (the monopoly and misuse of power by minorities), exploitation (unequal exchange in relations of production and through the market) and discrimination, unequal rights and treatment based on an incident of birth or of affiliation, such as gender, race, religion, caste, language or ethnic group (Imam, 1991). Moreover, Schumpeter (1962), equated democracy to the idea of the common good and posited that democratic method should incorporate institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people decide on issues that affect through the election of individuals who are to assemble to carry out its will. He further noted that this common good implies definite answers to all questions so that every social fact and every measure taken or to be taken can unequivocally be classed as "good" or "bad." All people having, therefore, to agree, in principle at least, there is also a Common Will of the people, the will of all reasonable individuals that is exactly coterminous with the common good or interest or welfare or happiness.

In summary, democracy can, therefore, be viewed as a system of government based on the principle that the state's power is vested in the people and may be used by the people or their elected officials under a system of free election (Huntington, 1996). Therefore, democracy focuses on political arrangements and participation, that is, institutions and processes that guarantee the rights and freedoms to choose and replace leaders through regular and free elections, equality of opportunity and access, and a just distribution of social benefits and burdens are maintained. Democracy may not yet be universally practised nor uniformly accepted but democratic governance has achieved the status of being taken to be generally right in the general climate of world opinion (Held, 1987). We can, therefore, conclude that democracy will continue to be a catchword of contemporary political discourse, a word that resonates with people as they struggle for freedom and a better way of life; it is the word whose meaning we must discern if it is to be of any use in guiding political analysis and practice (Schmitter & Karl, 1991).

### **3. LIBERAL AUTOCRACY**

According to Zakaria (1997), liberal autocracy is a non-democratic government that follows the principles of liberalism. It is a concept that is relatively widespread and was even more so in the 19th century (Zakaria, 1997). Notably, an important feature of the liberal autocracy is its ability to preserve the existing regime and not to allow any radical change in the pillars of governance. As such, it seeks to control political life indirectly to give a façade of democracy when the truth is quite the opposite, with everything under control through a blend of authoritarian laws that inhibit political climate. Additionally, the unfettered economic openness is also a hallmark of liberal autocratic regimes, which aims to maximize the gains of the ruling elite (Brookings Institution, 2008). Zakaria noted that until the 20th century, most countries in Western Europe had been liberal autocracies, or at best, semi-democracies. For instance, in 1830 Great Britain was considered the most democratic European nation, but only allowed less than a quarter of its population to vote for one house of Parliament. However, in the 1880s around 40 per cent of its population could vote. (Zakaria, 1997).

Robert Eccleshall in his well-read article on liberalism postulated that liberalism, in the ultimate analysis, is a political ideology intimately associated with the birth and evolution of the capitalist world. So we can say that as political ideology liberalism means to pursue policies of freedom in political and economic spheres and clear restrictions on the activities of state authority (Eccleshall, 1979). Similarly, Philippe Schmitter's idea of liberalism focused on political liberty, or as a doctrine about economic policy, and may additionally have coincided with the rise of

democracy. However, it has by no means been immutably or unambiguously linked to its practice. Today the two strands of liberal democracy, interwoven in the Western political fabric, are coming apart in the relaxation of the world. (Zakaria, 1997). On the other hand, authoritarian or non-democratic governments can be categorized into three main types: military, civilian dictatorships, and monarchic governments (Cheibub et al. 2010).

#### **4. IS IT DEMOCRACY OR LIBERAL AUTOCRACY IN AFRICA?**

In most African countries, democratic principles are subsequently enshrined in the constitutions and legal orders of the independent states, however, experience has shown that African governments have increasingly become liberal autocratic rather than democratic (Anyang 'Nyong'o, 1992). According to the Freedom House index of political and civil liberties: only ten countries in sub-Saharan Africa are termed free, while 14 are not free and the rest are only partially free (Freedom House Index, 2008). The changing nature of democracy in Africa can be attributed to the growing clout of many leading authoritarian regimes such as China, whose influence in making enormous economic strides without introducing democratic reforms has raised doubt on the notion that democracy is the only appropriate political system for wealthy countries (Plattner, 2015). As Gyimah-Boadi points out, China is providing African governments with alternative non-Western markets, trade partners, and sources of military and development aid that is not tied to considerations of human rights or government accountability and transparency in the recipient states. Nor is China the only assertive nondemocratic power. Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Venezuela also have been learning from one another and even cooperating directly to thwart democracy's progress (Plattner, 2015)

In the quarter-century, since African countries began to obtain their independence in the late 1950s, few governments in the Sub-Saharan region have changed hands as a result of free elections (Jackson & Rosberg, 1985). Most presidents, prime ministers or military rulers in Africa owe their positions to Machiavellian uses of force, bribery and guile rather than to popular support. As such, long-lasting rulers such as Kenyatta, who ruled Kenya from 1963 to 1978 and Mobutu in Zaire from 1965 to 1997, can be understood in Machiavelli's terms as strong men (Jackson & Rosberg, 1985). Nevertheless, what was witnessed in Egypt since in 2005 following a constitutional amendment authorizing other candidates to contest for presidential election is a shift from absolute totalitarianism to liberal autocracy, allowing a measure of liberties specifically those that do not interfere with the survival of the regime, such as giving the media space to criticize the government, ministers and sometimes the president but in a timid way without taking real measures (Brookings Institution, 2008).

Nevertheless, the 1990s marked a period of democratization in much of sub-Saharan Africa: more than half the countries in the region held multi-party elections during the first half of the decade, many of them for the first time (Van de Walle, 1999). However, since then the depth and extent of democracy have remained fragile. For Instance, in South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) has won each national election with up to two-thirds of the votes since the first post-apartheid elections in 1994. At the same time, the governing ANC has introduced a process of democratic decentralization allowing people to participate in the freely electoral process. However, to what extent does this process allow for increased power-sharing in South Africa and real political space for the political opposition? (Uddhammar, Green, and Söderström, 2011). Similarly, a crude way to assess the depth of democracy is whether elections can deliver a peaceful change of party. This might indicate whether the ruling party allows the opposition sufficient space to campaign and whether structures are stable and robust enough to process a change of regime peacefully (Huntington, 1991). For instance, Zimbabwe in 2008 provides an extreme example of an election in which the opposition party was inhibited during campaigning,

electors were intimidated, and the state institutions were systematically exploited to ensure a victory by the ruling party. Likewise, the 2007 presidential elections in Nigeria and Kenya, both judged by election monitors as significantly flawed, saw the re-election of the respective ruling party's candidates (Sáez and Gallagher, 2009). The increase in elections and superficiality of democracy in Africa can be partially accounted for by the fact that much democratic reform in Africa has been donor-driven (Manning & Malbrough, 2013). While donors make regular electoral contests a condition for aid and debt relief, many African regimes have paid little more than lip service to reforms, aided by the relative weakness of state institutions which enable the subversion of free elections. Equally, the African people have too often been denied participation and control in too many aspects of life through a myriad of centrally coordinated social controls. They include the imposition of state control prohibitions on to issues about property rights, rights to organise, and popular participation in decision-making (Imam, 1991).

Although most African states recognize voting rights as enshrined their constitution, an examination of what states do in practice paints a different picture. It shows that the process faces several challenges as a result of human interference (Abuya, 2010). For example, a causal analysis of the laws in Cameroon appears to show that the country has enacted an array of legislations which are capable of facilitating popular participation by the people in the political life of the country. Yet, apart from the deceptive tenor of the laws, the actual application of the laws on the ground is a far cry from the impression one gets from a superficial evaluation of the laws and institutions in Cameroon (Yanou, 2013). This conclusion is apparent from the international condemnation of the Cameroon government's electoral records over the years. Important to note is that in a functioning democracy, citizens are continuously engaged in governance through interaction with those who make decisions. As such, marking a ballot and dropping it into a ballot box once every few years is an important element of democracy, but it is only one step in the process of creating a free society that genuinely serves the interests of all its people. The elected representatives who are responsible for making policy and laws on behalf of the people are required to fulfil their mandate in continuous consultation and dialogue with the citizens on whose behalf they act (Bobbio, 1987)

Besides, like the political institutions and the rule of law, a strong civil society supported by a free press enhances the legitimacy of democratic practices and reinforces expectations that electoral winners and losers will respect the “rules of the game” (Stephan et al, 1996). Furthermore, civil society organizations can shape government behaviour and can help define people’s expectations of how their government should operate thus fostering the growth of democracy in a country. However, Governments in Africa are responding to new media and civil society environments in multiple ways, many of which restrict access and freedoms. New laws and regulations limit who can produce and disseminate content, and define certain kinds of content as problematic. Governments often present these new laws as necessary to enhance order and security, protect vulnerable groups from hate speech and incendiary language, and prevent the spread of misinformation that might be harmful to political discourse and even public safety and health. However, many fear that these laws and regulations are primarily designed to limit anti-government and pro-opposition messages, squelch protests, and generally protect governments from embarrassment or removal (Conroy-Krutz and Sanny, 2019). In East Africa, for example, recent years have seen a spate of new actions limiting media (BBC, 2018). Since 2015, Tanzania has criminalized the publication of statistics without express approval from the National Bureau of Statistics, as well as information deemed false, insulting, or inflammatory (Dahir, 2018). Increasingly, African governments are using even blunter instruments, such as simply disrupting the Internet and social media during critical democratic periods such as when holding elections and during the agitation for expanded civil liberties. According to CIPESA (2019), 22 African countries have ordered the disruption of Internet networks since 2015, and six countries – Algeria,

Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Gabon, Sudan, and Zimbabwe ordered such disruptions in the first three months of 2019 alone.

Similarly, Pedzisai Ruhanya (2018) argued that African elections are, in simple terms, window-dressing rituals with no real political meaning other than the stuffing of the ballot boxes behind closed doors on orders of the incumbent. They are more of administrative formalities which African leaders follow as standard signs of good conduct adopted by their governments to Western states and international institutions on which they are financially and politically dependent (Ruhanya,2018). In this regard, therefore, authoritarian leaders and elected despots in Africa have increasingly followed the law as stipulated (rather than violate or ignore it) to pursue their ends within the boundaries of the constitution (Przeworski, 2014). For instance, despotic regimes seek to change the electoral rules in their favour to increase their veto powers (Bulmer, 2017). Several incumbents in Africa, who seek to remain influential in this new political environment, have tested constitutional limits, manipulated eligibility rules, and partnered with strange bedfellows to protect their interests. As such, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, the government barred two leading candidates from contesting and later anointed Tshisekedi as the election victor rather than accept opposition leader Martin Fayulu's win. Nigerien President Issoufou's main rival, who was arrested, had to campaign from jail and later boycotted the second round in March 2016 (Massalaki, 2016). In Burundi, President Pierre Nkurunziza defied international pressure and violently stamps out national opposition to extend his stay in power for a third term (ICG, 2016)

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, a concerning by-product of democratic reversal in Africa is the devastating effects it has on people's daily lives and wellbeing. (ICG, 2016). For example, In the Republic of the Congo violence erupted 'after protests in 2015 over the constitutional referendum that extended the eligibility of presidential candidates beyond age 70, which allowed Mr Sassou-Nguesso, 72, to run again' (Benn and Chauvet, 2016). Similarly, 50 people were killed in September 2016 in Kinshasa in protests against the president's decision to delay elections in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) (Burke, 2016). While all liberal autocrats may claim to rule in the name of the people, or for the good of the nation, they must enforce that rule through force. This is costly to maintain in the long term, but the more legitimacy that can be claimed, the lower the costs of staying in power (Dimitrov, 2009). Governments that are seen as legitimate can usually maintain law and order but at the same time pursue tough policies, albeit slowly, by promoting coalitions in nation-building. After all, few have noted that governments in developing countries should not have adequate police powers; the trouble comes from all the other political, social, and economic powers that they accumulate (Zakaria, 1997).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Based on the above foregoing, it is evident that in Africa we have liberal autocracy as opposed to democracy. However, it should be noted that liberal autocracy could be an important stage in the transition to full liberal democracy, According to Platter (2015), authoritarians or semi-democrats have many weaknesses, and democracy has many strengths, including the capacity for self-correction. Though democracy is often complacent and slow to move, over the years it has shown a remarkable ability to respond to crises. It was arguably in deeper trouble in the 1970s than it is today, but it bounced back. It can do so again. But first, its proponents need to undertake a well-researched appraisal of its current dwindling status in Africa and summon the resolve and seriousness of purpose needed to reverse it. The birth of the citizen in Africa is a significant step in the construction of democracy. Citizenship is not merely an attribute of constitutional declaration, but the empowerment of individuals to exercise civil, political, legal and religious rights. As such, in re-conceptualizing how African citizens can appropriate control of their

societies, multi-partyism is insufficient without the existence of substantial autonomy for civil society; that is to say, the increase in the capacity for social actors (trades unions, mass media, women, peasants, professional and other associations, entrepreneurs, etc.) and individuals to act without undue restrictions, whether from the state or in authoritarian practices in their organizations.

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## 7. ETHICS

Ethics were observed in this paper by acknowledging all the sources used in the paper. All the references were put in the reference page.

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