

# **CONSOLIDATING PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA: THE CHALLENGES AND THE WAY FORWARD**

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## **Abstract**

Pro-democracy reforms hit Africa like a tidal wave in the 1990s, sweeping away authoritarian regimes and the one – party system that had dominated the African scene since independence. This began with the 1988 riots in Algiers, the 1990 release of Nelson Mandela after twenty – seven years in South Africa’s prisons and the crisis that followed the annulment of June 12, 1993 presidential election in Nigeria. For the most part, changes came about because both military and civilian governments had failed to alleviate poverty, unemployment, and oppression and had not provided their citizens with such basic services as health, housing, and education. Administrative inefficiency, political corruption, economic mismanagement and social decay had further undermined the authority of autocratic leaders and national institutions. These unpalatable conditions led to popular demands for reform throughout Africa. This paper examines the various challenges facing democracy in Africa and proposes solutions intended to give democracy a chance to flourish in African counties.

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**Keywords:** Democracy, Participatory-democracy, pro-democracy, Africa, consolidating

## **Introduction**

Most African countries have since the 1990s embraced democracy albeit with various levels practice. That elections, as a means of participatory democracy and changing government, are held is in itself good development as Africa moves farther and farther away from illegal and sometimes bloody change of government typical of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Dada, 2009).

But the democracy terrain in Africa is so uneven as it swings from such promising democracies like Nigeria, Benin republic, Botswana, Mauritius, South Africa and Ghana to Quasi – Democracies as Burkina Faso, Chad, Central Africa Republic, Gambia and Gabon.

Indeed some like Madagascar, Guinea Bissau, Mauritania and Guinea seem to be relapsing (African Agenda, 2009). The situation is much more complicated for post – conflict countries like Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d’ Ivoire, Angola and Congo Democratic Republic who have to deal with not only devastated infrastructure but also grapple with collapsed institutions of state. With a highly expectant population looking for a quick return to normalcy, these post – conflict democracies face a nagging situation that continues to threaten the growth of democracy in Africa.

Democracy as a system of government has become an important parameter to measure good governance, development and acceptability in the comity of nations, in addition, issues of internal security and conflict resolution have been found to be inherent in democracy. It has often been said that a larger percentage of the socio – economic problems confronting sub – Sahara Africa is essentially that of inability to practice true democracy. Economically, it is evident that investors prefer to take their investment to countries that are politically stable and conflict free.

The popular conceptualization of democracy is that it is “a government of the people, by the people and for the people”. According to Adegboye (2005) this definition presupposes a number of assumptions:

- Mass participation in elections and electioneering process;
- The larger percentage of the citizenry is involved in governance;
- The government is responsible to the people in all ramifications;
- People can “reject” an unpopular candidate through the ballot or by recall;
- Elections are usually free and fair;
- Citizens will always exercise their civic duty by voting during elections;
- The sanctity of the ballot will be respected.

If these assumptions are taken to be correct, then it is expected that significant proportions of eligible and registered voters will turn out to vote during elections and as well participate in the democratic process to ensure good governance. However, the situation in Africa has shown that political participation is not as participatory as it ought to be due to certain dysfunctional phenomenon. Issues of poverty, ethnicity, conflict, ignorance, thuggery, terrorism, political assassination, large scale corruption and “god fatherism” have combined to undermine the political process and hinder development to a great extent.

### **Definition of Democracy**

Williams (2011) defines democracy as a form of government in which all people have an equal say in the decisions that affect their lives. Ideally, this includes equal (and more

or less direct) participation in the proposal, development and passage of legislation into law. It can also encompass social, economic and cultural conditions that enable the free and equal practice of political self – determination.

The Webster’s encyclopedia dictionary defines democracy as “a theory of government which in its purest form, holds that the state should be controlled by all the people, each sharing equally in privileges, duties, and responsibilities and each participating in person in the government, as in city – states of ancient Greece; in practice, control is vested in elective officers as representatives who may be upheld or removed by the people”.

Adegboye (2005) defines democracy as a form of government or political administration which is undoubtedly an enviable practice that ensures equity, fair – play and social justice in any society, state or region where it is practiced in its strict – sense.

While there is no universally accepted definition of “democracy”, equality and freedom have both been identified as important characteristics since ancient times. These principles are reflected in all citizens being equal before the law and having equal access to legislative process. In a representative democracy, every vote has equal weight, no unreasonable restriction can apply to any one seeking to become a representative and the freedom of its citizens is secured by legitimized rights and liberties which are generally protected by a constitution.

### **The Value of Democracy**

Why should “the people” rule? Is democracy really superior to other forms of government? History particularly 20th – century history – demonstrates that democracy uniquely possesses a number of features that most people, whatever their basic political beliefs, would consider desirable: Encyclopedia Britannica (2010) listed some values of democracy to include:

- i. “Democracy helps to prevent rule by cruel and vicious autocrats;
- ii. Modern representative democracies do not fight wars with one another;
- iii. Countries with democratic governments tends to be more prosperous than countries with non democratic governments;
- iv. Democracy tends to foster human development – as measured by health, education, personal income, and other indicators – more fully than other forms of government do;
- v. Democracy helps people to protect their fundamental interests;
- vi. Democracy guarantees its citizens fundamental right that non-democratic system do not, and cannot, grant;

- vii. Democracy ensures its citizens a broader range of personal freedoms than other forms of government do;
- viii. Only democracy provides people with a maximum opportunity to live under the rule of law;
- ix. Only democracy provides people with a maximum opportunity to take moral responsibility for their choices and decision about government policies; and
- x. Only in a democracy can there be a relative high level of political equality”.

### **Participatory democracy**

Participatory democracy is a process emphasizing the broad participation of constituents in the direction and operation of political systems. Etymological roots of democracy (Greek Demos and Kratos) implies that the people are in power and thus that all democracies are participatory. However, participatory democracy tends to advocate more involved forms of citizens participation than traditional representative democracy (Abayomi, 2010).

Participatory democracy strives to create opportunities for all members of a political group to make meaningful contributions to decision – making, and seeks to broad the range of people who have access to such opportunities.

### **Political Variants of Participatory Democracy**

Political variants of participatory democracy include:

1. **Direct Democracy:** This is a form of government in which people collectively make decisions for themselves, rather than having their political affairs decided by representatives. Direct democracy is classically termed “pure democracy” depending on the particular system in use, it might entail passing executive motions, making laws, electing or dismissing officials and conducting trials. Direct democracy stands in contrast to a representative democracy in which the decisive authority is vested in a subset of people, usually on the basis of election (World Book Encyclopedia, 2006).
2. **Grassroots Democracy:** Grassroots democracy is a tendency towards designing political process where as much decision – making authority is shifted to the organizations lowest geographical level of organization. The principle is that for democratic power to be best exercised, it must be vested in a local community instead of isolated, atomized individuals, essentially making it the opposite of national supremacy. As such, grassroots organizations exist in contrast to so – called participatory systems, which tend to allow individuals equal participatory systems, which tend to allow individuals equal access to decision – making irrespective of their

standing in a local community, or which particular community they reside in (Williams, 2011).

**3. Deliberative democracy:** Deliberative democracy (also called discursive democracy) is defined by Bessette (1994) as a form of democracy in which public deliberation is central to legitimate law making. It adopts elements of both representative democracy and direct democracy and differs from traditional democratic theory in that deliberation, not voting, is the primary source of law's legitimacy. Cohen (1959) outlined some conditions that constitute the root principles of the theory of deliberative democracy, in the article "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy" he outlined five main features of deliberative democracy to include;

- i. An ongoing independent association with expected continuation;
- ii. The citizens in the democracy structure their institutions such that deliberation is the deciding factor in the creation of the institutions and the institutions allow deliberation to continue;
- iii. A commitment to the respect of a pluralism of values and aims within the polity;
- iv. The citizens consider deliberative procedure as the source of legitimacy, and prefer the causal history of legitimation for each law to be transparent and easily traceable to the deliberative process;
- v. Each member recognizes and respects members' deliberative capacity

**4. E – Participation:** E – participation is the generally accepted term referring to "ICT supported participation in processes involved in government and governance". Processes may concern administration, service delivery, decision making and policy making, E – participation is "the use of information and communication technologies to broaden and deepen political participation by enabling citizens to connect with one another and with their elected representatives" (Macintosh, 2004).

**5. Consensus Democracy:** Consensus democracy according to Lijphat (1999) is the application of consensus decision – making to the process of legislation in a democracy. It is characterized by a decision – making structure which involves and takes into account a broad range of opinions as possible, as opposed to systems where minority opinion can potentially be ignored by voting – winning majorities.

### **Challenges of Democracy in Africa**

At the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, democracy faced a number of challenges, some of which have been problems of long standing, others of which were more recent.

Many African countries that made a transition to democracy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the problems and challenges facing democracy were particularly acute. Obstacles in the path of a successful consolidation of democratic institutions include economic problems such as widespread poverty, unemployment, massive inequalities in income and wealth, rapid inflation and low or negative rates of economic growth.

After half a century of post – colonial governance, which was admittedly fraught with many political and economic hiccups, the sets of norms generally accepted by African countries has brought only relative stability and prosperity within only two decades, we are confronted by new difficulties that must be addressed if African system of democratic governance is to survive and move forward. The resulting challenges have arisen also because human society is dynamic and is in itself also impacted upon by political, economic and social considerations at any given time. Some of these challenges include the following: political challenges, the challenge of African political leadership, and economic and social challenges.

### **Political challenges**

Rawlings (2008) opined that most African peoples have already noticed that the new system of governance is being severally tested by the lack of good faith in certain leaders and administrators. According to him, some of those politicians who gained leadership positions as a result of the strict adherence to the norms of democracy are now, and at the end of their tenures, the very people trying to corrupt the democratic system of governance because of their selfish lust for power and money, and so, we see a serious challenge to the meticulous adherence to constitutionalism. They are busy to prolong their stay in power through fair or foul means to modify, sometimes crudely, turn a multiparty democracy into a virtually one – party state, to arrogantly abuse the concept of the separation of powers, to ignore the rule of law, to undermine judicial independence, to inter-fare with the fundamental human rights of political opponents especially, and to capriciously use decentralization to promote parochial or sectarian interests.

A second political challenge is how to avoid the politics of exclusion and the creation of a society of unequal. The “winner takes all” mentality that we have inherited from other forms of western democracy has led to the rejection of the concept of power sharing or the involvement of other party members in a government of inclusion even when it is clearly in the national interest so to do.

A third form of challenge to democracy in Africa is the refusal of governments to adhere to the “Good governance Agenda”. For democracy to succeed, there must be a role for

the opposition, decentralization must also be equitable, the media must be assisted to be free, pluralistic and independent, civil society organizations must have the unfettered freedom to operate and lastly, there must be a strong commitment to anti-corruption war. In all these areas, we have seen leaders across the continent fail badly as the opposition is openly hounded and denied any significant role in governance, as leaders have themselves become absolutely steeped in corruption and opulent life styles, as the powers that be refuse to prosecute corrupt ministers and top government officials especially, as the purchase of the loyalty and bias of a large section of the press erodes the right of opponents and as the use of radio and television stations to attack opponents is sanctioned in the hope of making opponents unpopular over time. Examples abound in almost all Africa countries, thus impeding fast progress towards the goals that alone can lift African countries and peoples out of poverty, ignorance and economic backwardness. According to Rawlings (2008) the serious challenge of ensuring a democratic dividend for women, youth, disabled, ethnic minorities, to mention but a few interest groups, half a century after achieving political independence and after almost two decades of having been acknowledged practicing democracy, African women still hang precariously on the lower rungs of the political ladder, in spite of many constitutions and United Nations resolutions urging all countries to pay attention to their status and roles, the youth continue to be largely illiterate unemployed and disillusioned and ethnic minorities continue to live in fear and obvious disadvantage (Rawlings, 2008).

### **Challenges of political leadership**

The failure in the practice of ideal democracy in Africa can be attributed to many factors, both internal and external, there is the unquestionable evidence that the failure are as a result of bad political leadership. At the top of this failure of leadership is the scant respect that many African leaders have for constitution and constitutionalism. The ease with which extra terms of office are pursued by certain leaders and the manner in which the illegal or unconstitutional objective is pursued has made the failing particularly objectionable and attributable to failed leadership.

A second challenge to African leadership is the tendency of leadership to foster ethnic or tribal ascendancy in political parties, the military and security situations which may lead to the creation of ethnic crimes and civil services.

Thirdly, the most current and terrible leadership failure on the African continent is the manipulation of election results, described variously as “rigged election” or “election manipulation” or “sham election” or “stolen verdict” or “stolen mandate”.

However, evidence abounds that the desperate attitude and winning at all costs ambition of some political leaders makes the acceptance of election results rather difficult and has led many African leaders committing electoral crimes and the refusal to adhere to the process of a peaceful and smooth changeover of government.

### **Economic and Social Challenges**

For the gains by Africans in the practice of democratic governance to survive and be sustained, the mass of African people must be introduced to significant economic prosperity. The failure of a large number of African economies in the first three decades of their independence showed that the economy is also doomed to failure if such internal and external mismanagement of the economy is not brought to an end and reform, based on certain demonstrable capacities of leadership, is immediately substituted. The first challenge of that economic goal according to Rawlins (2008) is the achievement of economic self reliance and independence, many African countries, which ignored the lessons of that experience hurriedly, became consumer societies and adjuncts to certain developed countries' economies, following the attainment of political independence.

The second economic and social challenge to democracy in African continent is the lack of efficient attention to non – existent or poor economic and social infrastructure. The building of roads, railways and communication systems as well as the electricity plants, water systems etc continue to be of top priority in the continent. The challenge facing the continent here is to develop the economic and technical skills and the adequate human resource for negotiating with the developed World Trade.

The third economic challenge to the survival of democracy in Africa is the lack of resolve to empower certain important economic actors in the various countries. With the present state of economic condition of African countries, the abject poverty, illiteracy, deprivation and hunger, one can not but wonder how democracy and economic prosperity can be built and consolidated if the larger percentage of masses are left in the present predicament. There is no alternative to the economic empowerment of the people through an investment directly in their collective abilities to produce and market. African governments must ensure the survival of other citizens by appropriate administrative, medical and economic policy interventions.

### **The Way Forward**

In trying to find out why democratic governance is not working as well as intended in Africa, it is equally necessary to proffer solutions to these problems and challenges.

- African countries must persevere and fast – track the building of those institutions that will promote democracy and economic betterment on the continent. Laws and institutions such as parliament, the judiciary and the civil service must be reformed and strengthened as to make them extremely difficult to be subverted by politicians and political leaders. African countries must strengthen the judiciary and anti-corruption agencies.
- African countries need to develop the system that will hold their leadership to accountability without fear or favour. This comes from strengthening institutions such as the opposition, parliament, auditing bodies and the general public to be able to ask questions and demand answers. It is through the active vigilance of such institutions and citizens that arrogance and impunity can be discouraged and stopped.
- It is also important that Africans undergo an attitudinal change towards leadership that does not meet their expectations. Unless the citizens boldly reject fraud and criminality in leaders, wrong – doing will persist. Unless African people disabuse the mind of politicians who think the electorates can be bought to surrender their rights and votes, leadership will continue to commit fraud, rig elections and amass ill – gotten gains at the expense of the whole country; unless African people learn to stand up against dictators and political charlatans, democracy will continue to fail in the continent.
- There is the need for cooperation among states in confronting corruption and waging war on other lapses. The continued existence and prospering of many of these challenges in one another’s country gives support and nourishment to the lapses themselves.
- African media should help in ensuring that credible elections are held in the continent. The media should conduct searches on the background of politicians with a view to letting their readers know more about them.

Conclusively, Africans must respect themselves, for without this self esteem and respect for one another, they can not teach any lessons to those who suffer from tyrants, incompetent leaders and economic exploiters.

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