

## **Attractions and Limitations of Liberal Democracy in Africa**

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### **Abstract**

Democracy is today one of the most popular concepts not only in academic circles, but also in governmental as well as non-governmental domains. The New World (Dis)Order has made its liberal version to acquire a fairly standardized and universal connotation to the neglect of

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contextual variables that may impact on it for good or ill. This paper questions the universalistic conception of liberal democracy as one, whose character is fairly standardized, arguing that such a conception represents a major disservice to democratization in Africa. Consequently, liberal democracy has not only become subjective, but also theoretically ambivalent and analytically vacuous. Its dispositions as a "celebrity" in its own right, tend to propel undemocratic forces to pretend as democrats to avoid coveting international resentment. For this reason, the concept of liberal democracy can be indicted of complicity in the level of autocrats in civilian garbs across the globe particularly in Africa. In its present form and character, the concept of democracy does very little or nothing to illuminate our understanding of contemporary politics particularly in the African context. Its main attraction seems the advancement of Western interest especially the USA in the consolidation of its Cold War victory, and that of opportunistic African leaders in their quest for power and accumulation of private capital. Critical questions pertaining to its contexts of origin and metamorphosis must, therefore, be interrogated if the concept would ever be useful both theoretically and analytically.

## **Introduction**

The talk of democracy is very influential. Indeed, democracy is today probably one of the most popular concepts not only in academic circles but also in governmental as well as civil society domains. While it has a long history in political theory, the use of the concept of democracy does not belong to the category of concepts defined in universalistic terms, whose character is fairly standardized within the context of its origin. But, the end of the Cold War and the subsequent emergency of a New World Order has, hypocritically indifferent to the contexts of its origin and metamorphosis as it were, tends to make democracy acquire a fairly acceptable, standardized and universal connotation, to the neglect of contextual variables that may impact on it for good or ill. Consequently, democracy as a concept has not only become subjective, difficult as it is to operationalize (measure), but also theoretically ambivalent and analytically vacuous. As the "hottest" bride in town, with its celebratory disposition as a "celebrity" in its own right, it often propels "undemocratic" forces to pretend as democrats to avoid coveting international resentment. In this sense, the concept of democracy can be indicted of complicity in the level of autocrats in civilian garbs across the globe particularly in Africa. The universalistic conception of democracy as one, whose character is fairly standardized, therefore, represents a major disservice to the concept.

This paper attempts a critical evaluation of the attractions and limitations of liberal democracy in Africa. The

paper's analysis is underpinned by the central question: what is the concept of liberal democracy good for? The main purpose of the paper is to explore this question in the light of inherent and apparent contradictions in the emerging standardized conception of liberal democracy (see Saul, 1997a: 219-236; 1997b: 339-353; Shivji, 1991; Robinson, 1996; Ake 1995 etc). But, if democracy is a concept whose values are standardized, why is it so markedly different in its level of development across time and space? What sort of difference do we refer to, and how does it impact on the usefulness of the concept today particularly in Africa? These questions are, no doubt, central to the substantive question of the study, either of which cannot be satisfactorily answered without a good knowledge of the meaning of the concept of democracy, showing its metamorphosis.

The first substantive section of the paper addresses the meaning, origin and growth of democracy. The next section conceptualizes democracy particularly its liberal version as an ideology. The last major section evaluates the concept of liberal democracy to ascertain its attractions and limitations in the global and African contexts.

### **Democracy: Its Meaning, Origin and Growth**

Democracy has been a concept of intense study. The resultant body of literature is equally very extensive. However despite the mass knowledge that has been accumulated over the years, there is little appreciation of the fact that its conception as an inevitable phenomenon whose values are not only standardized but also universal is not only

theoretically faulty, but also practically unsupported by reality. The global outlook of democracy that has emerged is therefore pretentious and runs contrary to the logic of the argument of this paper.

What then is democracy? This is certainly a difficult question to answer. Yet it is pivotal to the distillation of our central question. Let us begin with a general definition. Democracy is a system of government usually involving freedom of the individuals in various aspects of political life, equality among citizens, justice in the relations between the people and the government and the participation of the people in choosing those in government (Nnoli, 2003: 143). This is in line with the "common good and the will of the people" thesis of democracy. As Schumpeter (1950: 250-283; 1967: 153-188) democracy entails that "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions, which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals, who are to assemble in order to carryout its will". The second side of democracy, according to Schumpeter (1950; cf Quinton 1967: 173), emphasizes the centrality of competition to the emergence of political leadership. In this sense democracy is an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote".

What these general conceptions suggest is that democracy as a system of government stresses the sovereignty of the people (see Zack – William, 2001:213-214; Osaghae,

1994). It is also reminiscent of Robert Dahl's "two dimensions of democracy" (Dahl, 2000:35 – 40). The first dimension sees democracy as "an ideal, goal, aim, or standard, one that is perhaps unachievable but nonetheless highly relevant not only for classifying and judging political systems but also for fashioning strategies of democratization, designing appropriate political institutions, and so on". An ideal democracy is therefore coterminous with "a political system that might be designed for members of an association who were willing to treat one another, for political purposes, as political equals" (Dahl, 2000: 37). Such a system requires certain criteria for effective functioning. This include a set of fundamental human right of citizens, democratic political institution to boost citizens' participation in electing representative, to freedom of expression, inquiry, discussion and so on. One important thing is that these rights and opportunities must not just exist as merely abstract moral obligations, but must be "enforceable and enforced by law and practice" (Dahl, 1989: 106 – 131; 1999: 35-43, 83 – 99; 2000: 37-38).

This takes us to the second dimension of democracy. It has to do with democracy in practice, as opposed to it theory. This becomes the more pertinent because, as Dahl (2000: 38) has also pointed out, "having rights and opportunities is not strictly equivalent to using them". The mere fact that democratic society concede certain rights, for example to vote and be voted for, to their citizens, does not imply that all qualified citizens will participate in these activities. In reality, there is ample evidence to support this position. For example,

empirical studies have shown that citizens do not put much value on actual participation themselves in political life, as exemplified by the experience of European Community as a whole. There, it was found out that "average over the entire period 1973 – 92", "17 percent said they discussed politics frequently, and 34 percent said they never do so" (Topf, 1995: 61; cf Dahl, 2000:39).

Lamentable this seeming contradiction marks a major problematic about the concept of democracy, which may not be unconnected with its context of origin. Within the context of the Greek City State to which democracy owes its origin as an ideal and a practice, it was for a very long time confined to the borders of Athens. This was at a time when Athens was sustained by the labour of its slaves, who incidentally were in overwhelming majority relative to the free citizens. It would therefore be catastrophic to allow for egalitarianism in the decision making process. This is because such would have enabled the slaves to predominate over their economically superior master but with limited number (see Nnoli, 2003:146). Hence the Athenian democracy excluded the slaves, as "equality, freedom and justice values were to be confined to free citizens". Democracy therefore, within the context of its origin in Athens during the Greek era, was an exclusionary phenomenon, where women and slaves were deprived of any political rights (El-Din, 2003: 5). In fact, it was such that in another Greek State, Sparta to be specific, which existed about the same time as Athens, the issue of egalitarianism in decision making even among the so called free citizens was absent. This was due to the threats of revolution from the slaves to

upturn the table against the citizens. This led to the emergence of a strong military machine to thwart such a revolution. It was also necessary to be able to crush it if it materialized. Under such a circumstance, as Nnoli (2003:146) has rightly observed, "some, if not most, of the citizens necessarily lose their freedom " and "Sparta was reputed as a military dictatorship or oligarchy."

Following the dialecticism that characterizes the history of human society, from the slave through the feudal to the capitalist epoch, nowhere has egalitarianism, fairness and justice have ever prevailed. The ascendancy of bourgeois democracy following the industrial revolution in Europe and the subsequent colonization of colonies particularly in Africa attest to this (El-Din, 2003: 6). But following the marginalization of the bourgeois by the nobility in the decision making process, their focus shifted from securing favourable conditions of international trade to that of removing the privileges of the nobility at the political and economic realms so that they could assert their growing influence in society. Thus such concepts as freedom, equality and justice were conceptualized as inherent to man, sanctioned by arguments of natural law, and found expression in doctrines of natural and human rights (Nnoli, 2003:148).

During the Cold War, the concept of democracy became a part of the propaganda arsenal of both ends of the ideological spectrum – the West led by the United States of America (USA) and the East led by the Soviet Union. Why the former champion a kind of democracy built on liberal philosophy of individual freedom and equality the latter



emphasizes what it called socialist democracy where the state calls the shot. Following this classification, the USA reportedly worked assiduously to overthrow the democratically elected working class government of Salvador Allende of Chile in 1973, and supported all forms of anti – democratic regimes in the name of fighting communism (see Nnoli, 2003: 149). The Cold War era also witness the rise of what was called African socialism in Africa as champion by African leaders such as Kwame Nkuruma of Ghana, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and so on. Thus the concept of democracy assumed some ideological underpinnings that were inimical to theory building and the universalization of knowledge on democracy.

With the end of the Cold War in favour of the West, there has been the ascendancy of liberal democracy on a universal scale, with no competing values (see Fukuyama, 1991). Its values include pluralism and multi-party system, including free and fair competitive politics; popular participation; the rule of law, respect for human rights, and equality of access to all citizens and groups to the state power and resources; gender balance; and constitutionalism, among others (see Osaghea, 1999: 7; Ayoade, 1998: 1-8). The universalization of these values, with little or no contest from any quarters, would appear to be of a moderating influence on "the clash of civilizations" as espoused by one of the most articulate, influential and original thinker and writer of our time, Samuel Huntington (Huntington, 1996). But, this may not be so, if we interrogate further the concept of liberal democracy as an ideological category, which may still possibly

recede with time, like all other previous waves of democracy (see Huntington, 1991), considering the level of criticism that has attended it.

### **Liberal Democracy as Ideology**

Our understanding of democracy in its current form and character will be enriched if we treat it (liberal democracy) as an ideology. This requires that we first of all have a working definition of what an ideology is all about, as well as its defining character. Basically, an ideology is "a systematized and interconnected set of ideas about the socio-economic and political organization as a whole" (see Lane 1962; cf Nnoli, 2003: 178). Essentially, it serves to provide collective legitimization of governmental actions and/or inactions, as well as a basis for popular mobilization in support of such actions. Characteristically, an ideology often tends to arise in conditions of crisis, is exclusive, absolute and universal; and in the extreme, may be personalized and turn into a sacred belief similar to religious beliefs (Nnoli, 2003: 177 – 183).

If we situate liberal democracy within the context of the foregoing description, one finds that it is largely an ideological phenomenon. For example, the rise of liberal democracy on a universal scale was as a result of the crisis and contradiction of the Cold War era, for the battle of dominance between the West and the East. And since its victory at the end of the Cold War, its waves have continued to spread in an unprecedented manner, such that no region, not even the once impregnable Eastern Europe, is free from its hegemonic penetration. It was so much that the ascendancy of liberal

democracy, following the end of the Cold War, has been labeled as "the end of history", portraying it as "the final form of government" (Fukuyama, 1991). It has therefore become hegemonic and universal, and fast assuming the status of a "global religion" for the mobilization of citizens internally, as well as citizens and states, in addition to other actors at the international level. This is exemplified by the fact that donor states and institution have now come to link their development assistance/aid to democratization. The same condition has equally been set for any form of concession on the Third World quest and clamour for debt forgiveness/cancellation (see Diamond, 2001; Baylies, 1995: 321-337; Allen, 1997: 329-337).

Generally the hegemony of liberal democracy has not been without criticisms. As far back as 1984 when the Cold War was still alive, Barber (1984: 4; cf Saul, 1997a: 230) has forcefully argued that:

We suffer, in the face of our era's manifold crisis, not from too much but from too little democracy... from the time of Toqueville, it has been said that an excess of democracy can undo liberal institutions. I will try to show that an excess liberalism has undone liberal institutions. For what little democracy we have had... been repeatedly compromised by the liberal institutions with which it has been underguided and the liberal philosophy from which its theory and practice has been derived... Liberal democracy is ... a 'thin' theory of democracy, one whose democratic values are prudential... means exclusively individualistic and private ends. From these precarious foundations, no firm theory of

citizenship, participation, public good or civic virtue can be expected to arise.

Earlier, Huntington (1975; cf Barber, 1984: 95 and Saul, 1997b: 341) has argued that the problems of governance in the United States then stemmed from an "excess of democracy". For him "the effective operation of a democratic political system usually requires some measure of apathy and non-involvement on the part of some individuals and groups". Still in the same tradition, Manfred Bienefeld powerfully argues:

Unfortunately genuine democracy is hard to reconciled neoliberalism's mystical belief in the magic of disembodied markets, its fierce hostility to the notion of state and society as organic entities capable of defining and pursuing a common interest and its insistence on pervasive deregulation. Under such conditions, the state loses the capacity to manage the economies in accordance with democratically determined social, ethical or political priorities. Only the shallowest and most meaningless democracy will survive in a 'cowboy capitalism' where property rights became virtually absolute because states and electorates are disempowered by the mobility of capital ... (Bienefeld, 1995: 17; cf Saul, 1997b: 343).

While these assertions may be general, the African condition is certainly more pathetic. For example, even in the face of glaring possibilities of pervasion and abuse, Africans had had to continue to support the struggle for democracy the

continent as a "second independence" movement. Their hopes of material improvement and political empowerment were recklessly shattered because of the divorce between public policies and social needs. Even where the two converges, poor implementation due to massive cronyism has always been a clog in the wheel. The result is the general atmosphere of democratization of disempowerment prevalent in Africa. As Claude Ake has poignantly pointed out:

Democracy is been interpreted and supported in ways that defeat these aspirations and manifest no sensitivity to the social conditions of the ordinary people of Africa. Generally the political elites who support democratization are those with no access to power, and they invariably have no feeling for democratic values. They support democratization largely as a strategy of power... the people can (only) choose between oppressors and by the appearance of choice legitimize what is really their disempowerment (Ake, 1995: 39 – 40; cf Saul, 1997b: 349).

African resignation to fate is understandable. It was due to their helplessness. For, as Miliband (1994: 190 – 191) has observed, virtually all "government in the 'Third World' have accepted the hegemonic role of the West and adapted their economic and social policies to it. The price for not doing so is beyond their capacity and their will." Perhaps, this helplessness explains the fragility of democracy and development across the continent. This is a semblance of what John Saul (1997b: 339 –353) refer to as the "fear of being condemned as old fashioned", which has made Africa to

follow the path of liberal, at the expense of people/popular democracy. Despite its inherent tendencies towards popular disempowerment, liberal democracy has continued to gain popularity and recognition as the final form of government the world over.

Even as scholars continue to talk about too much or too little of democracy, there is yet the problem of measurement. Onyeoziri(1989: 80) has pointed out, to say that a political system is democratizing is a theoretical statement. This is because at the level of phenomenal reality, we cannot physically point at the political system and say, "this is democratization going on." Measurement therefore bridges the gap between a theoretical concept and observational reality. To adequately measure democracy however requires a multiple indicator approach that will capture the entire domains and dimensions of democracy. While such dimensions have engaged scholarly attention (for example, Bollen, 1990; Cutright, 1963: 253-264; Dinneya, 2003: 137-177), the problem is still far from being over. It should be noted that these dimensions are institutional, processual and behavioural, and any good measure must capture all these dimensions. The breakdown of these would include elements such as participation, competitiveness, inclusiveness, openness, civil liberty, level of toleration of political opposition, succession credibility, legitimacy standing of government, independence of electoral bodies, mass media and judiciary, quality of governance, level of democratic dividend and the general environment of politics. Again there

is also the problem of how to assign numerals to, and scale these indices.

Yet, every country of the world today claims to be democratic, even if its democratic credential is not beyond the level of teleguided elections, with little or no chances of leadership alternation, as has mostly been the case in Africa (see Jinadu, 1997; Bratton, 1998; Adejumobi, 2000; Omotola, 2004a). In most cases, this has been partly responsible for the high level of legitimacy deficit among African governments (see Omotola, 2004b) with the protection offered by such façade election it is therefore not difficult to come across several leaders especially in Africa who, except for the simple fact that they assumed office through the ballot of the box, whose results were at best suspect and questionable, are by all standard autocratic in their style of governance. Basic human rights as simple as that of freedom of expression, right to vote and be voted for and the like are not only being violated with impunity, the economic rights of the people particularly the peasants have been effectively mortgaged through the elevation of the capitalist component of liberal democracy to a dizzying height. This is usually done through economic reform agenda built on chronic opportunism and political patronage that made the accumulation of private capital dependent on the state, to the disempowerment of the masses (see Omotola, 2005; 2004c). The argument that democracy is a precondition for development therefore stands defected at least in the African context (see Ake, 1996; 1995; 1994).

Flowing from the foregoing, liberal democracy can be described as an ideological category, which despite its contradiction and criticisms, has continued to enjoy universal practice. It has continued to be a rallying point within the context of socio-political and economic mobilization at all levels of governance. Yet there is more to it than meet the eyes. This questions the very usefulness of democracy as a concept.

### **Attractions and Limitations of Liberal Democracy**

What then is the concept of democracy good for with reference to Africa? From the preceding analysis, democracy as a concept can be said to serve two useful purposes and interests. First is that of the developed democracies and advanced economies of the West particularly the USA, which emerged as the victor from the Cold War. To consolidate its victory, the USA has to strengthen its values especially liberal democracy that constituted one of the core issues of the Cold War. This was necessary to prevent any possible reversal and by extension erosion of its pyrrhic victory. Democracy is therefore a useful concept for the preservation of Western (American) hegemony across the world. This hegemony is mostly demonstrated through the so-called democracy aid industry, through which liberal values such as elections and election monitoring are emphasized (Omotola, 2009; 2006; Carothers, 2009).

Second, liberal democracy is also useful for the African countries not only because it has become one of the major conditions for development assistance by donor states and



agencies, but also because it serves the interest of African leaders in their quest for power and accumulation of private capital. In order to achieve both development assistance and accumulation of private capital at a minimum cost, the surest bet is for African leaders to be seen as being "democracy compliant", no matter how pretentious such may be. The most prevalent example of this tendency in Africa relates to the conduct of ritualistic elections, just to fulfill all righteousness, without meeting internationally acceptable standards of democratic elections (Omotola, 2009; 2008; Roth, 2009). These standards can be measured in terms of popular competition, participation and legitimacy (Lindberg, 2004). Assessed against these indices, African elections are far from being democratic. With the notable exception of Ghana, Botswana and South Africa (Gyimah-Boadi, 2009), African elections are nothing more than the fading shadows of democracy often adopted by autocrats to masquerade as democrats (Roth, 2009; Adejumobi, 2000).

Beyond these, liberal democracy is completely emptied of any meaningful relevance. It is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for development especially in Third World countries in general and Africa in particular. This is because, as Allen et al (1992: 10; cf Saul, 1997b: 348) have pointed out, "much more commonly, democracy serves as a system through which class domination and various forms of systemic inequalities are perpetuated and legitimized." In Africa, for example, the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s through the 90s represented an example of World Bank and IMF dysfunctional policy prescriptions for

Africa. As the SAPs turned out, it further pushed Africa down the margin towards total collapse. These manifested in the form of political, economic and social dislocations, including rising unemployment, urban unrest, poverty, inflation and general decline in the standard of living of Africans. the end result was the excruciating debt burden it inflicted on most African economies and the widening of the developmental gap between Africa and the developed economies (Omotola and Saliu, 2009; Omotola and Enejo, 2009).

Democracy is also both an exclusionary and elitist phenomenon, which marginalizes, nay excludes the masses especially at the economic realm. This is best exemplified by rising official corruption, increasing inequalities between the rich and the poor, and the privatisation of the privatisation process, or what Omotola (2005) calls 'deregulation of disempowerment', etc. In fact, democracy, be it liberal or not, is not a necessary attribute of human life because it has not existed from time immemorial. Its origin and growth were embedded in a Western historical context, grounded on the economic and social development of Western societies and to that extent entrenched in capitalist theories (see El-Din, 2003: 6; Nnoli, 2003: 146 – 149). The fact that it has passed through many waves whereby its contents vary from one epoch to the other, having been known in the Athenian city states system only to disappear and reemerged in a different shape after the industrial revolution (El-Din 2003; Huntington, 1991) is an eloquent testimony. The Cold War was to later have profound impact on its definition from ones spectrum of the ideological continuum to the other, in addition to its transformed

meaning and virtues in post-Cold War order. Today, main emphasis is placed on elections and related institutional parameters, without adequate attention to more substantive issues of human well-being and development. This trend, in a sense, reflects what Carothers (2009) calls the political approach to democracy assistance at the expense of the developmental approach. Although he did not call for the abrogation of the political approach, Carothers seems to privilege the developmental approach over the political approach, but calls for a careful merger of the two in a mutually reinforcing manner.

In the final analysis, therefore, the attempt to portray liberal democracy as a universal and inevitable phenomenon, whose character is fairly standardized and perhaps a necessarily attribute of human life is largely unfounded. This development negates the fact and lesson of history. The messianic connotation attributed to it as a precondition for development assistance and by extension development, has not only made it subjective, but also contributed to the high level of autocrats in civilian garbs across the globe especially in Africa. Conceptually, therefore, democracy is analytically vacuous and theoretically ambivalent, difficult as it were to adequately define and measure. In its present form and character, the concept of democracy does very little or nothing to illuminate our understanding of contemporary politics particularly in the Third World. Critical questions pertaining to its contexts of origin and metamorphosis must therefore be raised if the concept would ever be useful both theoretically and practically.

## **Conclusion**

What I have done in this paper is to interrogate the usefulness and otherwise of the concept of liberal democracy in the African context. It would seem, as suggested by the preceding analyses, that the universalistic conception of liberal democracy as one with a fairly standardized values and possibly inevitable to human existence, is not supported by the fact of history and a body of empirical evidence and well-constructed theory. Rather, it is merely an ideological category, whose character and form have been everything but constant under its various waves over the years. Thus apart from its usefulness in advancing the interest of the West in propagation of its values, and that of it dependant for foreign aid of various kinds from the Third World, the concept of democracy, to all intents and purposes, serve little or no useful purposes. Indeed, it is a major source of disservice particularly to the developing countries, which pathetically have had to live with it due to their helplessness. With democracy as the only game in town, what these countries need to do is to situate their democratization process within their particularistic and systemic contexts to accommodate their political culture. But as a concept, it is too ideologically laden, analytically vacuous and theoretically ambivalent to illuminate our understanding of contemporary politics in the Third World and beyond.

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