

Democracy and Africa's Search for Development

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Abstract

The clamor for democracy all over the globe is not accidental. Those who go about such business of agitating for democratization are convinced that no society truly desirous of development can ignore democracy. The democratic experiences of the developed countries of the world lend credence to the truth of this claim. However, the reverse seems to be the case in many of the third world countries where there has been a huge gap between the anticipated gains of democracy and the reality on ground. Given the African situation, this then leaves one wondering to whether democracy brings about development everywhere or not. This paper investigates African states' proclivities towards democracy in their search for development and offers philosophical expositions of the missing gaps. While the paper argues that the universal features that define democracy are requisites for development anywhere, there are however some peculiar factors that stringently inhibit against the manifestation of this relationship in Africa. These factors, in their internal and external forms, are epitomized by leadership failure across the continent, posing enormous threats to the developmental aspirations of the people. This failure accounts for the ignorant acceptance of the neo-imperialistic assumptions smuggled into the definition of democracy. It accounts for the inability to provide the basic needs of the people in spite of huge resources, both material and human. The paper thus concludes that Africa can truly develop only when the leadership question is rightly settled.

Introduction

It is evident that the most popular form of government today in the world is democracy, judging by its wide acceptance and pretensions to it by those who in reality are averse to its tenets. The reason for this lies in the fact that being democratic today now signifies being good and admissible into the comity of nations as opposed to the isolation meted out to regimes considered to be despotic. For Africa, the gale of democratisation as known today did not gather steam until about four or five decades ago with the collapse of European colonisation and the dawn of political independence. In an age where public morality gets more Machiavellian and pragmatic in spite of spirited pretension to the contrary, laying claim to democracy becomes prudential.

This is not to say there are no loud grumblings about democracy, its purpose and the constant interpretations, to which it is constantly subjected at the whims of the user. To this end therefore, this paper tries to examine the meaning of democracy, its underlying assumptions and the ideological dimension it has assumed. Furthermore, the paper tries to look at the implications of all the above stated factors as it relates to Africa's quest for development. In the tradition of philosophy however, it becomes pertinent to begin with the clarification of the concept under discourse.

The Idea of Democracy: Meaning and Origin

One fundamental problem created by the elastic use of the concept of democracy is the problem of definition. (Falaye, 1998:97) A pointer to this fact is that "the promotion, practice and vicissitudes of democracy in different parts of the world have exposed it to some definitional haze and diverse forms of interpretations. (Adediran, 1996:47) Therefore, it is not a thing of surprise that by the word "democracy", a thousand scholars may have a thousand divergent opinions. Two reasons advanced for this by K. A. Owolabi is that first, "democracy has become in current usage, another word for political decency and civilisation" (Owolabi, 1999:5). It is an idea that has become a moral concept thereby drawing the patronage of various regimes that proffer it more for the sake of survival than true commitment to its ideals. Secondly, democracy is difficult to define due to ideological connotation. For example, the ideological tussle between the socialists and capitalists has generated a situation in which regimes become tagged democratic not necessarily because of its participatory tendencies but mainly due to its ideological persuasion. Therefore, it becomes difficult to present a definition of democracy which can be called objective.

However, the quest to know the ideal definition of democracy becomes imperative because:

If democracy is not properly defined people would live in an inextricable confusion of ideas, much to the advantage of demagogues and despots (McGowan, 1991:21).

In addition:

It leaves us in the danger of refusing something that we have properly identified and getting in exchange something that we would not want at all (McGowan, 1991: Ibid).

Classically, democracy is derived from two Greek words: *demos* and *Kratia* meaning people and rule respectively. It can thus be understood to literally mean rule by the people. Perhaps it explains why Abraham Lincoln in his Gettysburg address defined democracy as the government of the people and for the people.

In ancient Athens, democracy was used to describe a practice where all male citizens, (excluding women, children, slaves and foreigners) meet freely on a frequent basis to deliberate on issues bordering on their lives. Everybody was playing the role of government by creating rules and regulations and the running of an orderly society. This was made easier because the population is not over bloated for the convenience of such practice. Yet, we must understand that the economic system of slavery and feudalism served as a catalyst to the success of direct democracy because the slave owners had ample time to partake in government business.

However, all the above factors have vanished into history as the mode of production shifted from the slave system to that which encouraged division of labour, competition and activity as the new socio-economic condition. This has made the workability of direct democracy today a utopian conjecture. The import of this reality leads us thus to indirect or representative version of democracy. Democracy, from a Lockean view can be seen as a contract between the people and the government. The government is to ensure freedom and security while the sovereignty lies with the people who may decide to use it against the government if it fails in its responsibility. This view is complemented by J.J. Rousseau (op.cit, 1991) for whom democracy means the government merely serving as the executors of the people's will. For Jim Unah (1993:4), democracy is a state with unlimited opportunities for adult participation in political life. This means that democracy is a process through which political participation is guaranteed and maximised. Alaba Ogunsanwo (1994:139) described democracy as "a whole series of processes and cultural values which relates to the selection of leaders at all levels of society, the behaviour of groups and individuals vis-à-vis those who hold different views on issues under consideration, as well as the use of power by those the selection process has placed in decision making position". One thing to be noted is the fact that by this definition, emphasis is being placed on participation.

However, no democracy in the world can boast of guaranteeing participation to the fullest. Democracy construed in such a way remains a theoretical construct as we have said earlier. That is why representative democracy seems to gain wide acceptability. This explains why Appadorai defined democracy as:

A system of government under which the people exercise the governing power either directly or through representative periodically elected by themselves. (Janda & Goldman, 1995:101)

This definition poses the question that does election necessarily translate to an exercise of governing power? It is an attempt to answer this question that Kenneth Janda *et al* attempted a division of democracy into two parts. The first aspect is procedural in nature in the sense that it provides the framework for people to vote, contest election, debate public issues among other things. The second aspect deals with the outcome of democracy in terms of meeting human needs and satisfying basic goals. (Ibid., 125) democracy therefore is a means to an end. The basic aim of democracy in any nation is to acquire development. It makes no meaning to invest fortunes in building a democracy that yields no result.

Features of Democracy

Despite the differences highlighted in models of democracy, what makes the theory worth its name are salient and universal in nature. They are factors without which a country cannot be said to be truly democratic. The first essential feature of democracy is the idea that legitimate authority emanates from the people either directly (through popular assemblies) or by delegation through elected assemblies or other means of representation.

Next to this is the rule of law. This means that power should not be arbitrary and that its exercise is circumscribed by a set of rules with respect to limits and mode of operation. It equally emphasises conformity with the law in public spheres and the existence of a judicial system strong enough to ensure the impartiality of the law as well as the protection of the rights and liberties of individual or groups.

The idea of accountability also comes in. The element of choice in democracy implies that the governed must not only approve the rules and the rulers but they must also approve the policies they implement. Besides, citizens have the right to participate in government through transparent and democratic elections, decentralised governmental structures and the freedom to associate politically, professionally and socially, coupled with the independence of such associations from the state.

Democracy must also be able to guarantee the removal of a government that fails to serve the desired purpose. John Locke in his “social contract” described the state as a glorified secretary, which the public has the right to hire and fire if it fails to deliver. Although Abraham Lincoln is more popular for his definition of democracy, he equally canvassed the removal of anti-people government. As a member of congress in 1848, he made a speech while commenting on the US invasion of Mexico in which he stated that:

Any people anywhere being inclined and having the power, have right to rise up, and shake off the existing government and form a new one that suits them better. This is a most valuable – a most sacred right - a right, which we hope and believe, is to liberate the world(1991).

This right is recognised both by liberal and social democracy worldwide as a means of safeguarding democracy. This is evident in the desire of the world liberal powers to ostensibly replace undemocratic regimes with democratic ones globally. Equally, Karl Marx advocated and even predicted the rise of opposition and eventual revolution until a state achieves perfection.

The existence of democracy in any society is based on a minimum set of requirements, part of which we have highlighted above. Their presence or absence point either directly to democracy or its opposite (autocracy) (Plato, 557-558).

The Challenges of Democracy

There is no political system devoid of problems or shortcomings. Yet, democracy seems to be the most problematic due to the hopes and expectation of enormous weight it carries. As a theory of majority rule, Plato and Aristotle argued that the quality of majority decision is the resultant effect of the view of the individual who make up the majority, which is usually made up of the mob and the ignorant. Such a rule therefore, is a rule of the mob. The mob however, may not be able to come up with the best for the society. That is why Plato described democracy as “a form of government (anarchy) which violates the fundamental principles of justice, according to which men, being born with different capabilities, should do only the work of which they are fitted. (Momoh, 1993:36)

C.S. Momoh gave credence to this view in a related manner when he asserted that the verdict of the majority might not be the solution to societal problems. He writes:

The implication of this is that where the worldview of the majority is racist, tribal, unfair and unjust, democracy becomes tainted with these vices (Momoh: Ibid).

Sophie Oluwole further endorsed this view when she platonically noted “democracy is a levelling doctrine, an embodiment of injustice because the democratic process fails to give full recognition to the fact that man is unequal in a number of significant respects and hence cannot be given equal rights in everything. (Oluwole, 1992: 14)

Another challenge faced by democracy is that of difference between the content and practice. In an age of immense ability for mass communication and propaganda, the democratic freedom of the voters are impinged and impeded via the means of adverts, commercials, and guided opinions polls and so on. The resultant effect is that the process does not often aggregate the real interest of the people but rather what they are made to believe to be their wants and interests. Thus, “the idea of sovereignty of the people contains much that is unrealistic and impractical. (Oluwole, 1992: Ibid).

Closely related to this is the occasional nature of democracy. During election periods, politicians saturate the entire polity courting the bride; the electorate. Immediately after, a schism comes in, separating the ruler from the rule. In many modern democracies, therefore those who rule are really the government and the bureaucracies, not the people. The people are further marginalised in a democracy during the tussle for power. In most cases, those who emerge are not necessarily the best, but those with the financial muscle to manipulate the process in their own favour. Many good candidates go into election out of the genuine desire but without the colossal financial backbone capable of seeing them through.

Another challenge democracy faces is that of protocol and formalities. As a process, it takes time to arrive at decisions, which may at times prove fatal. An example is the mass killing which culminated into a state of emergency in Ekiti state, Nigeria in late 2006. Response to issues in a democracy is therefore time-consuming. Beyond all the above is the fact that like the people, vices are also at liberty in a democracy. Corruption, nepotism, ethnic jingoism, political violence and so on permeate all strata of the society. Democracy is thus a process beset with many problems.

Thus, a lot of scholars have argued that democracy is an ideal that does not, and cannot deliver on its exaggerated promises. Some have taken it further, on the evidence of the development of many Western democracies that its success abroad may not yield the same result for Africa. The problem of democracy has led a lot some scholars to wonder whether its promises are not exaggerated. In fact, they are skeptical about its ability to replicate its much-vaunted results in the west in Africa. Kolawole Owolabi for instance, is of the view that African culture is not in congruence with democracy. He asserts:

Having realized that the days of colonization were numbered, the West discovered that it could not survive without exploiting the resources of the third world countries. One way by which the West can successfully realize this goal is to step up its cultural Imperialism and promote its democratic culture as the ideal culture. (Owolabi, 1994: 115)

Democracy therefore is, in his own opinion to be seen as an instrument of continuous exploitation by the West and antagonistic of culture. Corroborating this, John Morrows_(1998: 168) presented an argument which he says encapsulates the thought of anti-colonial movements that the theories which liberal democracy upholds clash with indigenous values and could not address the developmental imperatives in education, public health, economy and ration –building facing countries emerging from long period of colonial domination.

Thus, we have two skeptical schools of thought on the possibility of democracy enhancing development. The first are the Universalists like Plato whose antagonism of democracy is not defined by geography or culture. The particularists include Owolabi and Morrow who feel that democracy is alien to African culture and as such not to be expected to solve its legion of problems.

Democracy, Africa and Development

The universal skeptics have obviously risen in our opinion, challenging issues in the discourse on democracy. But then, it is apposite to make a few comments. There is no system of government that is not fraught with problems. This means that democracy is not an exception and should not be dismissed on the basis of its imperfections.

The challenge is to keep improving on the shortcomings and strive towards the attainment of its ideals. It is necessary to briefly dwell on Plato's preference of the "wise" ruler to the rule of the mob. What he overlooked is that the question of who is sound enough in judgment and character to rule a state is not abstract. It is value laden. Thus, it is the society that still determines what it means to be competent for leadership as there are no such parameters independent of human judgment .in other words, those that are meant to be led are those who determine whether a certain individual has what it takes to be trusted with leadership.

Another issue is the argument, which says that democracy is for the elites, as it requires a huge arsenal of financial resources to successfully win an election. Yes, election costs money, and the society can only be the better for it, if it's dangerous implications are quickly nipped in the bud. But is not all about money. In many instances, people who are not known to be stupendously wealthy have won elections on the basis of the people's desire for change. Money definitely was not the overriding factor in Peter Obi's emergence as Anambra State governor. (We are all too familiar with the godfather saga of Anambra state for it to be repeated here) Adams Oshiomole, recently declared winner in Edo State and awaiting the decision of the Appeal Court, like Segun Mimiko in Ondo State is not known to be the richest in his state.

We are more concerned with the particularistic position in this paper, which rejects the workability of democracy in Africa. This position can hardly be dismissed with a wave of the hand, given the increase level of democratization in Africa and the apparent level of squalor and underdevelopment. The Nigeria experience has been peculiarly pathetic. Never has there been a stretch of democratic rule uninterrupted for this long. Never has the nation made money, as it is doing now.

But then, never has much been stolen, or poverty so entrenched. More and more school leavers are finding it difficult to enter higher institutions for lack of space, those already there are dropping out, and the quality of the education received for the lucky few who finish leave much to be desired. The Niger Delta has become a disaster zone, and power supply in spite of official rhetoric is at an all- time low. Given the above scenario, it becomes necessary that we re-examine all facets of our rational life, democracy not the least.

In blaming democracy however, the particularists miss the point. The ideas embedded in democracy, that the people chose their leaders, have a say in how they are governed and be empowered to demand transparent, accountable and humane leadership cannot be said to be alien to Africa. To say such is to say that the Black man thrives best in a Hobbesian state. This position is almost laughable in the face of the unmitigated backwardness dictatorial regimes have brought on the continent. From Nigeria to Zaire, Uganda, it has all been tales of plunder and woe.

Where the problem lies for Africa is the inability to differentiate between democracy in content and democracy in form. By content, we refer to democracy as the rule of the people, including all its features without which the name assumes something different entirely. These are the basic features we have enumerated above and their absence is the absence of democracy. By form however, we refer to the various ways in which democracy manifests itself in each society, tendered by cultural peculiarities.

Many countries, after independence were faced with the appropriate model of governance that would take them to the envied heights of their erstwhile colonial masters. The thinking, albeit erroneous is that a wholesale transplantation of ideas and practices would do the magic. The attempt by Africa to democratize and strengthen its institution was right; what went wrong was the inability to recognize the necessity of differentiating the content from the form in order to make informed choices. . This error of judgment served the purpose of the colonizers who were (and still are) hell –bent on maintaining their strangle hold on the resources of their erstwhile colonies. The idea was thus presented in a way that makes capitalism look as if it is the source of development. Disturbingly, it really is, but in a different kind of way. In talking about capitalism and Western development, one must not lose sight of the whole picture, which borders on being parasitic. It has succeeded in the West not so much because of its internal logic but due more to its relation with the developing world. Gunder Frank noted this much when he wrote:

As a photograph of the world taken at a point in time, this model consists of a world metropolis (today the United States) and its governing class, and its national and International satellites like the Southern States of the United States and international satellites like Sao Paulo. Since Sao Paulo is a national metropolis in its own rights, the model consists of further Satellites in turn. That is taking a photograph of a slice of the World we get a whole chain of metropolises and satellites....If we take a photograph of the world as a whole, we get a whole of such constellations of metropolises and satellites. The form of Metropolis-satellite relationship changes historically. (1967).

Here, we see a clear picture of the working pattern of capitalism not as an abstract framework but a historical one that is sustained through multiple sources of capital and material expropriation. It is within this context that one can properly understand the West's beatification of economic liberalism as a basic feature of democracy. Indeed, many Africans like Awolowo, Nyerere and many others through the deceit and consequently raised alarms as contained in their writings. Owing to the cold war, many of them saw socialism as the perfect antithesis to capitalism. Among other factors, the foothold already established by the colonialists served as leverage for them over the USSR. The collapse of the old Soviet was the icing on the cake as many interpreted it to be the demise of socialism. It is instructive to note that in form and content, the two ideologies were being sold to Africans by external forces.

At that stage, it would have been more logical to look inward in search for a homegrown economic order. But by queer logic, driven by the greed of many African leaders, the Soviet collapse became venerated as the vindication of capitalism. The argument follows therefore, that since Africa lacks the technological knowhow and the required financial muscle to drive the economy, the West should come to the rescue. Welcome to the proliferating world of economic buccaneers euphemistically called multinationals. Under the guise of globalization, the biting nails of Western hegemonies are being further sink into the wearing veins of the hapless economies. Unbridled liberalism, without equal indigenous capacity to compete even at home has left Western business concerning on a free rampage and rape of African economies. This situation, watered by the greed of African leaders and elites who actively connive with foreign interests has led to the present prostrate state of the continent.

Overtime, a few agents of these multi-nationals have become so big in their own rights and are now having a say in what goes on in their various economies. But the story has not changed because the issue remains that resources are taken away from the reach of the majority. They form cartels on oil, cement, common household items like sugar and salt and indeed anything imaginable.

Here, we come across a salient point missed by those who see democracy as the problem in Africa. This is the lack of understanding of the economic dimension of power politics. It must be said that:

Ideas about power and strategy did not stand on their own. As a series of well ordered theoretical constructs which constituted a blueprint for diplomatic action. Nor was power politics a system of thought as self-contained as is often depicted. To argue that statesmen operated mainly in terms of power do not dispose of the significance of underlying economic concerns or broader cultural influences (Darby, 1987:19).

What can be glimpsed from the above is that one, economic ideology could differ in two countries that are both democratic. Today, we have in the West capitalist democracies like USA, Canada, Germany on one hand; and socialist democracies like Sweden and Venezuela. Yet, there are those like Britain and France that are mixed. Two, what Owolabi refers to as an importation of democratic culture is nothing beyond an economic ideology of exploitation deceitfully wrapped up as democracy. There could have been no better way of persuading the people to take poison without garnishing it with sweeteners.

The Need for Character and Competence in Leadership

What is responsible for Africa's backwardness it must be emphasized is the problem of leadership manifesting in two ways. The first is greed. For a very long time, Africans, due to factors which spill from its colonial past and others like tribalism, military dictatorship, inter and intra- border clashes and a power-grabbing elite among others; have not been able to chose their own leaders in a free and fair manner. Those who get to power often do so as a result of foreign backing or indigenous elites with vested interests. Power thus becomes an instrument of enriching themselves and their foreign patrons through anti-people policies such as reckless deregulation, privatization programmes that hand over the economic life of a nation over to imperial agents in the name of foreign investors. The second manifestation of the leadership problem is ignorance. A lot of leaders in Africa are greedy, but they would have devised other means of aggrandizement if they were knowledgeable enough to understand the full implications of their commitments and deeds. The structural adjustment programmes of the late 80s and early 90s is a case in point. Many African leaders through the initiative, signed the death warrant of their various economies.

All these problems it seems, have got nothing to do with a system of government that insists on the people's sovereignty. If anything, democracy is against all those factors which favor the wishes of a selected few over the majority. That is why many countries in Europe always conduct a referendum on vital issues affecting them. Many of them like Ireland, Belgium, France, and Wales and have roundly rejected some of the economic proposals of the EU they consider inimical. It is instructive to know that these countries still remain important members of the Union. We make bold to say that contrary to those who see democracy as alien to Africa, its entrenchment would have saved the continent from the economic disaster it has become. The wasteland that the Niger- Delta in Nigeria has turned to is definitely not the failure of democracy. It is the absence of it in content.

By the nature of democracy, the people are entitled to control their resources. They have to decide whether capitalism is suitable for them, including the extent they wish to adopt it if they so choose. To mortgage the people's economic life away under the guise of market democracy without their consent is a negation of all that democracy stands for.

The solution to Africa's problem therefore, cannot lie in rejection of democracy. Rather, its features should provide the basis for fashioning out an economic model of development that takes into cognizance the people's culture, geography, beliefs and temperament. Each country on its own should do this. This is because many people confuse similarity with sameness. African rations have similar problems, but they are not exactly the same.

A country like Zimbabwe for instance must seek to reconcile the economic interest of the Black majority with the white farming minority unlike Nigeria where the Niger Delta issue has become a problem threatening the corporate existence of the nation. Britain like America is a democratic State, but similarity ends in content. They are realistic enough to know that the form of practice differs, and is constantly determined by factors and circumstance obtainable in each society at any given time.

It may well be that the people will settle for capitalism with variations that reduce the effects of its evils and curb the predatory consequences of foreign economic domination. After all, many Western democracies are also capitalist without blatantly exploiting each other. The relationship they maintain is tempered by mutual cooperation and respect. Also, many of hitherto developing nations in the East now referred to as the Asian tigers, they opted to invest in technology, leveraged on its prospects on the path towards development, such that many of them are frantically exploring capital outlets where minimum investments can yield maximum returns. Today, they compete with the West for whatever is left of Africa's economic life.

This is the challenge that African leaders face. The people must determine their economic life, given the strategic importance it has for their survival. Doing this however, is contingent on a leadership not bogged down by corruption and ignorance. To this end, we are of the opinion that character and competence are the most important factors in solving the leadership problem faced by the continent. Character on the part of the leadership addresses the problem of corruption, which has been the bane of the continent for so long. Leadership anchored on good character places the interest of the people above that of the self. It is apparent that the gale of looting across the continent is as a result of absence of character in leadership. To have character is to place a higher premium on integrity and service than a heartless appropriation of the people's patrimony for self-alone.

However, it will not be enough for such a leadership to be willing to serve the people. It must have a proper understanding of the dynamics of the continent's underdevelopment in a rapidly globalizing world. It must equally be wary of alliances and agreements that look harmless on the surface but portends harm for its people. Of course, there will also be internal challenges which if not deftly handled, erodes the much needed support of the followership that must necessarily be galvanized if sustainable development is to be achieved. The leadership must put in place measures anchored on democratic tenets, in which the people chart a course of economic recovery that will significantly reduce the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. Intellectuals must also insist on the entrenchment of democracy as a tool capable of setting the people free. Democracy, like any other theory should not be shielded from criticism, but then it must be done in a way that strengthens it rather than provide the intellectual ambience convenient for despots to exploit.

Conclusion

So far, we have tried to examine democracy and its undeniably delicate complexities. We have made effort to show that no form of government comes without challenges, but that democracy as of yet, has the best of prospects in strive for development; more so for a continent like Africa ravaged by hunger, diseases and ignorance. We have equally shown that democracy can only be meaningful if anchored on a leadership with the requisite character and competence to deal with the continent's teething problems. This in turn can be easily achieved when the people are allowed to have inputs into the emergence and direction of leadership.

As a form of government that embraces diversity and plurality in the society, guaranteeing equality of the citizens and their involvement in how they are governed, it remains the best system which accommodates development. Democracy has its own problems, but society must not relent at improving on them. Here, the famous saying that "eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" becomes highly apposite. The entrenchment and sustenance of democracy is thus a 21st century imperative for African development.

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