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1

Democracy and Good Governance in Africa: Beyond the Myths and Illusions

Amosu, Kehinde Olorunwa

Abstract

The principles and praxis of democracy involve not merely constitutional provisions or legal framework enumerating the procedures for leadership recruitment, power relations and role distributions, but also protection of salient social and political values. These values would include appropriate notion of public office (obligation and responsibilities), rule of law, and the matrix of leadership–followership relationship and so on. Arguably, the concept of western democracy as it is being practised in most new African states is bedevilled with several grave anomalies which can be traced to what we may describe as incongruities or contradictions in the ethico-cultural dimensions of enabling democratic environment. Thus, we may have to examine whether the principles and practice of Western “liberal” democracy in Africa do not involve spoliation of some fundamental principles of traditional African political value system, which also reveals the dilemma of assimilating the tenets of democracy to at least give a semblance of these tenets in the political experience and democratic process of postcolonial African societies. This paper asserts that the successful entrenchment of democracy and good governance in Africa lies in a constructive discourse of both the past and present in African political history.

Keywords: *democracy, Africa, common good, good governance*

Introduction

IN MOST AFRICAN STATES, THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS and processes has been fraught with several problems. The political leaderships in postcolonial African states have emerged as dictators thereby jettisoning the expectations of the people for a representative, responsible and accountable government. Myriads of forms of democracy have been adopted, most of which merely retain only the label but not the essence. And what has suffered the most blows is the extent to which the people participate in making public decision and how such decisions reflect the public interest (however that may be conceived).

It is often touted that each society has its own peculiar historical experience, which ought to determine the form of its political system. In this regard, it is suggested that what is rationally expedient is for each state to pattern the details of its political institutions and processes in such a way that would still protect the ideals and values of democracy. And that the democratic methods are not ends in themselves but means to an end. In this regard, the question to consider is if the variants of democracy there are in Africa are not expressions of various possible methods of governance. This is in juxtaposition to understanding what the fundamental ideals and ends of democracy are; and whether these ideals are universal and trans-historical in terms of relevance to different societies with varying levels of political awareness, socioeconomic conditions as well as cultural value system; or whether there are identifiable concrete conditions that would provide the enabling environment for effective democratic practice and strong democratic institutions.

Democratization in Africa

The last few decades witnessed an unprecedented upsurge in the political transformation of African states into one form of democracy or the other. Apart from the gross discontentment of the people with the dismal performance of military regimes or one-party dictatorship, leading to series of pro-democracy agitations and sporadic social unrests, the western powers have lost their patience with dictatorship regimes, and thus began to tighten the noose on the necks of the nations concerned. It could no longer be tolerated that the lingering woes of socioeconomic and technological backwardness in African postcolonial states continued to be blamed on their erstwhile colonial masters and their new forms of imperialist exploitation.

Western powers (UK, US, and France in particular) have always insisted that good governance is *sine qua non* for rapid socioeconomic development; and major ingredients would be democracy and economic liberalization.

According to Douglas Hurd (1990), the British government would regard a “good government” as an “effective and honest government, political pluralism and observance of the rule of law; as well as freer, more open economies.” They believe that in the absence of these conditions there cannot be any hope of rapid and sustainable economic development. Hence, the British government would support only “countries tending towards pluralism, public accountability, respect for the rule of law, human rights and market principles” (Hurd 1990). This position reflected the general disposition of the west to which most African nations began to comply with.

However, the experience in most African nations still fall far short of the ideals expected. In the guise of nationalism, cultural emancipation and claims to the principle of individual differentiation, some African political leaders have called for authentic and home-grown democratic systems. That the political system of each society must be allowed to reflect its peculiar historical and cultural experiences.

Each society has its own uniqueness in terms of sociocultural values and historical experiences; as such, it would be dysfunctional and counterproductive to impose any stereotypes on any society. Hence, many African states like Eyadema's Togo, Kenyatta's Kenya, Mugabe's Zimbabwe, Kaunda's Zambia, and even Nyerere's Tanzania adopted different political modalities that laid claim to "authentic" and indigenous democracy.

The current situation in Africa today compels the need to re-examine democracy in terms of its goals and how these goals are to be attained. As Sigmund Neumann (1965:7) suggests, "the survival of democracy will largely depend on the intellectual flexibility with which we will be able to shake off historical preconceptions and to redefine the role of democracy in our time." Neumann would describe the African situation as some of the many-sided assaults on democracy which reveals the urgent need for a definition of "Its critical position" to commensurate with the changing times and to provide guiding principles.

The Concept of Democracy

The concept of democracy is one of the most widely used terms that expresses diverse political arrangements. The contemporary confusion about the term arises from the several sometimes-incompatible political arrangements that are similarly labelled democracy. As Fotopoulos explains the situation, the current practice of adding several qualifying adjectives to the term democracy has further confused the meaning of it and created the impression that several forms of democracy exist.

Thus, liberals refer to "modern," "liberal," "representative" or "parliamentary" democracy. Social democrats talk about "social," "economic," or "industrial" democracy. And finally, Leninists used to speak about "Soviet democracy," and later "peoples' democracies" to describe the countries of actually existing socialism. (Fotopoulos Takis: 175).

Fotopoulos rejects the distortions created by these adjectives which gives the impression that there are several forms of democracy. For him, democracy is nothing short of the classical Greek conception which is the direct exercise of sovereignty by the people themselves. This is the only genuine democracy he would accept. Other so called modern conceptions or arrangements, to him, are forms of pseudo-democracy. He thus sets out to argue that there is only one form of democracy.

Fotopoulos' conception of democracy is an emphasis on the location of popular sovereignty and how the power derived from it will be exercised for decisionmaking. The crucial issue about this conception is the implication of the difference between the classical notion and the modern liberal notion. Fotopoulos insists that any arrangement which is less than the expression of the classical conception, as the popular sovereignty exercised by the entire people in making public decisions is one form of oligarchy or the other.

It will follow that governments in the west, far from being democracies, are mere liberal oligarchies. As such discussions about making a regime more democratic is actually on how to make the regime less oligarchic. People are under the illusion that they are still the custodian of popular sovereignty as in the classical Greek society, whereas in actual fact, they are under the firm grip of an oligarchy.

Perhaps the way out of this conceptual difficulty is to shift emphasis from the etymology of the concept to its functional application in the contemporary sense. Even then, we may sadly discover that the theoretical attractions of the democratic system may be more mythical than real, and our expectations based on it are bundles of illusions.

However, the effect of our despair will be mitigated if we clearly establish ab initio, what democracy in the contemporary western sense promises, and what it does not offer any guarantee.

In fact, Karl Popper's theoretical disposition is quite instructive at this juncture. The attraction of democracy, he believes, is better appreciated when it is juxtaposed with the various forms of tyranny. The essential feature of democracy is majority rule as a principle of decision making. But the basis for accepting public decisions (democratic decisions) would not be "from a doctrine of the intrinsic goodness or righteousness of a majority rule, but from the baseness of tyranny; or more precisely, it rests upon the decision to avoid and to resist tyranny." (Popper, 1966: 124).

To Popper, the essential element in the principle of democratic system is the proposal to create, develop and protect political institutions that will assist us to avoid tyranny. This does not mean that such a level of "faultless and foolproof" political system can be developed; or a system that will guarantee good or right decisions. As he puts it democratic system does not even guarantee that political decisions arrived at will always be better or wiser than the policies adopted by a "benevolent tyrant." The adoption of the democratic principle, he says, implies "the conviction that the acceptance of even a bad policy in a democracy is preferable to the submission to a tyranny, however wise or benevolent" (Popper, 1966: 125).

It seems to follow that both at the levels of theoretical principles and practical efficiency of political action (in terms of the quality of decisions and efficiency of process) the democratic system is problematic. To accept the democratic system just because it seems to be the best of all systems of government which have different propensities to tyranny is patently an over simplification of the problem.

A closer consideration of some of the core and basic assumptions that purportedly gives democracy its mythical strength will reveal that we should rather seek the justification and acceptance of the democratic system elsewhere other than in its underlying postulates.

As mentioned earlier, the notion that national sovereignty belongs to the people is popularly held with relish. As Neumann (1965: 7) puts it, this postulate

emphasizes that government derives its power and legitimacy from the people and is subject to the control of the people. "Whichever form such control by the people may take, whether it be direct or indirect, parliamentarism or plebiscitarian, in the last appeal the legitimation of the governing body rests with the citizen." This principle expressed thus, appears mild and inoffensive. But in its more extreme expression, it claims that political decisions through the democratic method represent the will of the people, the public interest or the common good. This impression is implied in the Eighteenth – century philosophy of democracy. As Schumpeter captures this conception:

... The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decision which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will. (Schumpeter, 1950: 1150).

We are no longer bothering ourselves with the question of whether or not the people by themselves take or participate in public decision-making process, we want to admit that in practical terms it is the representatives elected by the people that make the decisions on behalf of the people. In actual historical fact, what democracy provides is a method of electing individuals who will make public decisions on behalf of the people. Thus, the participation of the people in the governing process is limited to choosing their representatives. The next questions is, can we reasonably suppose that such decisions that will be made by these representatives on behalf of the people can properly be described as the expression of the common good or the will of the people?

Since John Locke, the theory of representative democracy and the concept of majority rule (as the principle of public decision making) have raised problematic issues in philosophical discussions. In the process of public decision-making, experience has shown that absolute unanimity among the people is often very difficult, if not impossible, in a large heterogeneous society. Hence, the theory urges that the position of the majority will be upheld against that of the minority.

Some of the issues involved here include the opposition of the majority will and the minority rights. It is argued that the majority – rule as a principle poses constant threats to the rights of the minority. Secondly, this principle rests on the presupposition that "the public good exist such that it is identifiable and that majority rule is the safest means for identifying it" (Bah, 1987: 39). The way Abraham Lincoln expresses the dilemma is quite intimidating:

A majority... is the only true sovereign of a free people. Whoever rejects it does, of necessity fly into anarchy or to despotism. Unanimity is impossible: the rule of a minority as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible, so that, rejecting the majority principles, anarchy or despotism in some form is all that is left. (Commager, 1958:8).

Though a theoretical dilemma, the problem that the principle of democracy is

facing here is nevertheless a serious one in its practical implications in historical situations where a restive and belligerent minority insists on challenging the right of the majority to suppress its own will.

As Dorothy Pickles analyzes it, a major challenge facing modern democratic states is actually to resolve this dilemma. On the one hand it is argued in favour of democracy that it is usually expedient to recognize that the principles involved on both sides of the line should not be pushed too far to the extent that they become extremely antagonistic and irreconcilable. It is common in Nigeria, nay Africa, to hear such words like dialogue, compromise and tolerance as vital values of democratic culture.

If minority interests are unduly sacrificed for those of the majority then there is a risk that the minority will revolt against a majority... On the other hand, to give free rein to the expression of individual will, where these are in conflict, is to risk anarchy or civil war. . . . (Pickles, 1977: 43).

The suggestion is to resolve the dilemma pragmatically by being alert to both dangers.

Ironically, the tacit acknowledgement of the right of the minority to freely express its interest often terminates with the conclusion that such expressions or protests should only be “tolerated provided that they are not likely to prevent the expression of the will of the majority.” In other words the supremacy of the majority rule is not negotiable. We may find solace in Franz Neumann second thought to resolve or dissolve the dilemma.

Since representative democracy cannot work out any arrangement for mass participation in political decisions, and the will of the majority must prevail, the real task lies in ensuring “the making of politically responsible decisions” (Neuman 1973: 193) This dimension will rather only compound our problem further because the democratic system neither promises nor capable of guaranteeing the delivery of such quality of decisions. Its explicit offer terminates as a method of decision making; not extended to the ends of such process.

From yet another perspective, there is the argument that the theoretical concern for the protection of minority interests from the “tyranny of the majority” will become almost uncalled for if we consider the facts of experience that the minority are essentially the dominant few. The opinion leaders, and leaders in the decision making process are in the minority. The masses who are being led constitute the numerical majority, not the vitally significant number. “When we talk about the core of the ruling class, the people who are actually involved (for all practical purposes) in the making and execution of laws and making public decisions, are numerically in the minority” (Ojo, 2000: 183).

Mulford Sibley paints a similar picture based on what he describes as inference from historical studies. Whatever the political arrangement or form of government, the governing classes are always the tiny fractions of the whole. “The vast mass of mankind are, save perhaps in acute crises, indifferent to public

affairs for the most part acquiescing in what the ruling groups determine" (Sibley, 1970:304). It may sound incongruous but many philosophers including Plato do not hold complimentary views about the people, the followership which liberal democracy wants us to adopt. This is even worse when we consider how the masses of African people are perceived, both in colonial and postcolonial societies.

Although what we are discussing in this context is the balancing of interests and power of the minority and majority within the paradigm of the demand of modern democracy, issues arising are of relevance to the assumption about the rationality of the people in decision making.

Appadorai identifies rational conduct, intelligent understanding of public affairs, independent judgement as well as tolerance and unselfish devotion to public interest as the adequate level of "ability and characters" which democracy demands from the masses of the people (Appadorai, 1975: 129). However, both theoretically and practically, this supposition is most unrealistic. The situation is more precarious even in modern states in Africa.

The much we may say is that these are essential to an effective democratic system; and efforts must be made through appropriate political education to assist the people to develop these qualities.

As a matter of fact, when it comes to rationality and objectivity in political judgements and decisions, many philosophers would not hesitate to express their distrust for the capacity of the people. Plato, Hegel, Machiavelli, Hobbes and many others would put emphasis on effective leadership since the people ought to be led.

The liberal thinkers, though acknowledge effective leadership as essential, would nevertheless insist on the sovereignty of the people. A balance to be struck would be located in creating functional institutions and machinery of government that will put appropriate checks on the rulers.

Citing an example in American history after the constitutional convention of 1787, James Burns writes, "under the new constitutions, authority was derived from the people, but direct popular action was frustrated by an elaborate system of federalism, separation of power, and checks and balances" (MacGregor, 1975:25). Burns describes the major task of an effective leader as articulating the diverse motives and interest of the people and mobilizing resources to satisfy them. The interplay of the process involved are quite complex but our concern remain the philosophical problems underlying them.

All through its checkered history, democracy has developed as a system of leadership recruitment process and people's participation in governance with a view to upholding the sovereignty of the people while making allowance for the emergence of a strong and effective government. Other societies may have been lucky, but the lot of Africans in this regard is a sad experience. All the key constitutional provisions and institutions have failed to moderate the exercise of political power to ensure good governance. In the final analysis, it is the people

themselves that must act to protect their true sovereignty, check the excesses of the rulers and provide the enabling environment for responsible governments to emerge. However, from our analysis thus far, this is a very remote wish.

Conclusion

We may have to ponder over pertinent questions, possibly in our quest for a way out. If we juxtapose the African traditional political system with the modern liberal democratic system, there are obvious incongruities. On the one hand, the ethico-spiritual principles that form the basis of the traditional political system are alien to modern democracy. On the other hand, the rational and humanistic postulates underlying liberal democracy are regarded as incompatible with the traditional political system.

Grave theoretical and practical inadequacies have been highlighted in our preceding discourse on democratic principles and practice, especially in Africa. We may have to suggest further discussions and to examine whether the “kwashiokorish” (uneven) growth of democracy in Africa is not due to the absence of those core traditional (cultural) political values while the unattractiveness of the traditional political system is not as a result of lack of capacity to accommodate the principles and values of modern democracy. The position here is to assert that the essence of a relevant and suitable political system from the ethical and humanistic point of view is to produce good governance. The emphasis would not merely be on producing a representative government, regardless of how much it attempts to approximate true representation, but also on being a responsible government in all its ramifications.

The question now is: Are the boundaries of the concepts of representative and responsible government coterminous? The traditional political system may not be describable as representative in the modern sense, but it seems to command more respect in terms of being able to produce a more responsible government than the modern liberal democracy, if our historical experience is anything to go by. Essentially, the future of democracy and democratization in Africa as an evolving political process that will produce good and responsible governance lies in a constructive dialogue between the past and the present in African political history.

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