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*Original Paper*

## When Africans Cast their Votes: Is it a Periodic Democratic Validation of Autocratic Rule?

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### Abstract

Almost all of the African countries south of the Sahara have held elections since 1989. Both countries that respect citizens' political freedoms and civil liberties and those that repress dissenting opinions often describe themselves as democratic in Africa. In some countries, ruling elites and authoritarian leaders often respond to the growing demands for democracy by organizing fraudulent multiparty elections aimed at satisfying the minimal demands of international donors. A club of authoritarian leaders has maintained an iron grip on power in parts of Africa, either by amending laws to extend their terms of office, hosting rubber-stamp elections, or repressing opposition and civil society. Even though the global climate has become decidedly more uncomfortable for non-democratic governments, some of the most enduring systems of personal rule in the world can still be found in Africa. Thus, this article interrogates a central question in the context of the lingering political phenomenon in Africa: Is liberal democracy alien to Africa or it needs home-grown model?

**Keywords:** Democracy, Election, Autocracy, Home-Grown Model, Civil Society

### Introduction

In general, governments exist to secure order, equality and freedom and supply certain public goods and services. The main purpose of order is to preserve life and property, if necessary by the use of force (Hunnes, 2013). In Africa, barriers to democratization persist throughout the continent: grinding poverty, widespread illiteracy, limited investment, huge foreign debts and ethnic and religious conflicts (Jost, 1995). It is posited that free and fair elections and civil liberties are necessary conditions for democracy, but they are unlikely to be sufficient for a full and consolidated democracy if unaccompanied by transparent and at least minimally efficient government, sufficient political participation and a supportive democratic political culture. It is not easy to build a sturdy democracy. Even in long-established ones, democracy can corrode if not nurtured and protected (The Economist, 2013). It is a testament to the power of the democratic idea that authoritarian leaders around the globe have claimed the mantle of democracy for forms of government that amount to legalized repression. Even as they heap disdain on the liberal order, they have often insisted on the validity of their own systems as types of democratic rule (Puddington, 2017).

Democracy is a system of government that gives preference to and strengthens citizens' decision-making, and thereby, promotes equal participation of local citizens in securing and building their nation for the collective good of all, while upholding the principles of justice, peace and the rule of law. However, Schaffer (1997) Karl (1986) and Ottaway (1993), among others, have recognized that "many countries have adopted the formal institutions of democracy without having become more democratic in substance" (Schaffer, 1997, p. 40) and in Africa where the cost of losing power by electoral means is extraordinarily high, autocratic or authoritarian regimes, dictatorships, have been a dominant form of governance in some countries. Authoritarian government has dominated the post-war history of independent Africa.

In its 2021 report, Freedom House rated only eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa as free. Of these eight, half are small island states: Cape Verde, Mauritius, Sao Tome and Principe, and Seychelles.

Others, such as Botswana, enjoy high levels of economic and social development (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). Unconstitutional changes of government which characterized post-independence African States and perennially ravaged the Continent have resurfaced in the last decade. There were five coups between August 2020 and October 2021 in sub-Saharan Africa, more than at any time in two decades: Mali in August 2020, Chad in April 2021, Mali again in May 2021, Guinea in September 2021 and Sudan in October 2021. Historically, between 1961 and 2010, there were 86 coups across Africa: 24 and 8 in the decades of 1971 and 2001 respectively (Matlou, 2015). Thus, while there is a steady decline in coup attempts globally, its resurgence in sub-Saharan Africa points to failure of democracy to deliver on development. Considering the level of popular support after each coup, especially at the local level, the poor quality of democracy and governance in Africa which disregards accountability, transparency, responsiveness and civic responsibility, has further been established.

Second-class economies, political tyranny, social depression, poverty, among other challenges, appear to typify the nations of the African continent as their inherent characteristics. Most African scholars recognize that consolidating democracy on the continent will remain a difficult and daunting task. Available evidence indicates that, in the first fifteen years, many of the new democratic regimes were still fragile and some of the euphoria of the early 1990s had evaporated. Some scholars and observers, such as Michael Bratton and Nicholas de Walle, even argue that democratization in Africa has been more illusory than fundamental, marking a transition from patrimonialism to neo-patrimonialism.

In the mid-1980s, democratic theory and politics in Africa entered a new phase as struggles for democratization spread across the continent and scholars began to vigorously debate the processes, prospects, and problems of Africa's democratic projects. However, a salient feature of the politics of sub-Saharan Africa for most of the period since independence has been the persistence of highly personalised authoritarian rule. Various explanations have been put forward in the literature to account for the demise of democratic institutions in the post-colonial era (Healey and Robinson, 1994). In fact, one hurdle to "effective, accountable and inclusive institutions" is the tendency of some African presidents to try and extend their number of terms in office by sidestepping or tempering with their country's constitution (Mwaura, 2016). In the light of Africa's diversity, any sweeping generalization about prospects for democracy and development would be misleading. Religious, political and ethnic identities are frequently exploited on the Continent to promote conflict, spread discrimination and hate speech, and ultra-nationalist, ethno-nationalist and extreme religious agendas.

### **Authoritarianism and Authoritarian Democracy Redefined**

Following the global spread of democracy around the world, scholars and institutions for democratic assistance (CODESERIA, Freedom House, Carter Centre, Overseas Development Institute, Centre for Democracy and Development and Irish Aid etcetera) described how different countries make transitions from authoritarian regimes to democratic regimes. They explained how each transition manifest under specific conditions (Isma'ilaa & Madu, 2016). Levitsky and Way (2010) have probably made the most comprehensive, elaborate and convincing attempt to create order in the grey zone between democracy and full authoritarianism. They do not try to solve the problem of all hybrid cases – they categorise only regimes filling special criteria as 'competitive authoritarian'. On the other hand, they indicate that 35 regimes were or became competitive authoritarian during 1990-1995 – around one sixth of all countries in the world at that time. Levitsky and Way define an ideal type – competitive authoritarianism – as an autocratic regime that employs a substantive number of elements of democracy, a regime where political competition is real but unfair.

Beatriz Magaloni's *Voting for Autocracy* (2006) not only demonstrates that hegemonic parties can successfully buy elections, but also shows how running up huge electoral majorities preserves authoritarian durability by dissuading defections by hegemonic party elites and demonstrating to both voters and the opposition the futility of challenging the system. According to Levitsky and Way, in competitive authoritarian regimes the incumbents violate at least one of the defining features of democratic regimes (Levitsky & Way, 2010). The traditional authoritarian state sought monopolistic control over political life, a one-party system organized around a strongman or military junta, and direct rule by the executive, sometimes through martial law, with little or no role for the parliament (Puddington, 2017). By this token, conceptually, authoritarian democracies are those political regimes

where leaders are not chosen in free and fair elections and in which people's rights to participate or engage in political, social and even economic activities, either individually or through any form of association, are severely curtailed. In these regimes, citizens are voiceless and cannot hold leaders accountable. Opposition and dissenters, either individually or in associations, are repressed severely through all forms of brutality, including assassination, kidnapping and incarceration (Kura, 2008).

Competitive authoritarianism, according to Levitsky and Way (2002) emerged out of three different regime paths during the 1990s. One path was the decay of a full-blown authoritarian regime. In these cases, established authoritarian regimes were compelled - often by a combination of domestic and international pressure - either to adopt formal democratic institutions or to adhere seriously to what had previously been façade democratic institutions. A second path to competitive authoritarianism was the collapse of an authoritarian regime, followed by the emergence of a new, competitive authoritarian regime. In these cases, weak electoral regimes emerged, more or less by default, in the wake of an authoritarian breakdown. A third path to competitive authoritarianism was the decay of a democratic regime. In these cases, deep and often longstanding political and economic crises created conditions under which freely elected governments undermined democratic institutions- either via a presidential "self-coup" or through selective, incremental abuses- but lacked the will or capacity to eliminate them entirely. As aptly captured by Arch Puddington (2017):

The 21st century has been marked by a resurgence of authoritarian rule that has proved resilient despite economic fragility and occasional popular resistance. Modern authoritarianism has succeeded, where previous totalitarian systems failed, due to refined and nuanced strategies of repression, the exploitation of open societies, and the spread of illiberal policies in democratic countries themselves. The leaders of today's authoritarian systems devote fulltime attention to the challenge of crippling the opposition without annihilating it, and flouting the rule of law while maintaining a plausible veneer of order, legitimacy, and prosperity.

In electoral or competitive authoritarianism, and in contrast to electoral democracies, elections are marked by an uneven playing field based on: formal and informal rules that construct prohibitively high barriers to participation; sharply unequal access of competitors to financial and media resources; abuse of power by the state apparatus for the sake of maximizing incumbent votes; and multiple instances of electoral fraud. The uneven playing field serves as a defining distinction between electoral authoritarianism and electoral democracy (Gel'man, 2014).

Democracy, for a long time, has been used as the political currency of the whole world. Especially after the fall of the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe and in former USSR, democracy has been considered as the best possible form of government. Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy "conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism and most recently communism" and it "may constitute the final form of human government" (Fukuyama, 1992, p. xi). Developments in Africa, according to Freedom House, show "a continued pattern of volatility amid overall freedom decline," with democratic backsliding exceeding advances.

Samuel Huntington's theory of waves of democracy, and of reverse waves, has been helpful in explaining this course of events. When the "third wave" of democratization swept across much of Africa in the wake of the Cold War, hopes were high that Africans would begin to enjoy the freedoms afforded to citizens living in the former colonial powers (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). However, the third wave of democracy did sweep across much of sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s, but has now subsided, except for ripples and eddies (Joseph, 2011). The spectrum of governance types in Africa parallels other critical challenges the region faces. Economic stagnation, underdevelopment, financial volatility, humanitarian catastrophes, susceptibility to Islamic extremism, and conflict are all closely linked to closed and unaccountable political systems (Siegle, 2006).

### **A Continent of Morbid Democracy**

Democracy takes a wide variety of forms across the world, but all democracies share the principle that sovereignty resides in the will of the people. In a democracy, governments must strive to arrive at societal consensus and this is usually achieved through elections. Levitsky and Way distinguish between three regime types: democracies, competitive autocracies, and full autocracies. Their

definition of democracy starts with Dahl (1971 cited in Bogaards & Elischer, 2016), but then adds the existence of a reasonably level playing field to free, fair, and competitive elections, full adult suffrage, broad protection of civil liberties, and absence of non-elected “tutelary” powers. Only if all of these conditions are met are countries classified as democracies.

Three major processes, according to Bangura (1991), appear to be central to democratic transitions from authoritarian military and one-party régimes: the demilitarization of social and political life; the liberalization of civil society; and the democratization of the rules governing political and economic competition. The first concerns the supremacy and regulation of civilian governmental authority; the second with the democratization of the state apparatus and the relative freedom of civil organizations; and the third with the capacity to democratically manage conflicts in civil and political society and economic practices.

As African states move towards democratic consolidation, significant challenges continue to threaten core principles of democratic governance in the continent. Chief amongst these challenges are the entrenchment of incumbency by those in power, the misuse of public funds for personal gain and the furthering of party interests (Bizos, 2017). Generally, “Electoralism” is a derogatory term alluding to mere electoral procedural formalities devoid of merit. This, in academic discourse, is more associated with African democracy. Now elections are being held in most parts of Africa, and party competition has often been used to describe whether or not a country is “a democracy”. In spite of the continent having shifted towards multi-party elections, not many people in Africa seem to take elections seriously (Wafawarova, 2017).

Even though “periodic alternation among power holders widens the pool of those who feel that they have a stake in the system, and reminds elected officials that they can be held accountable by voters” (Cho & Logan, 2009), ironically, it is at election time in Africa that the betrayal of the democratic spirit by those who claim to represent the people is most flagrant. By repeating crude or sophisticated manipulation of the electoral process, especially during presidential elections with universal suffrage, they have ended up impressing on the minds of the people that such practices are entirely acceptable in democracy (Yabi, 2015). The toxic combination of unfair elections and “majoritarianism” is spreading to illiberal leaders in what are still partly democratic countries. Increasingly, populist politicians -once in office- claim the right to suppress the media, civil society, and other democratic institutions by citing support from a majority of voters (Puddington, 2017).

Most African governments fought and got liberated from colonialism in the last century. In several cases, there was loss of lives in the process of wrestling power from colonial and neo-colonial forces to achieve independence. Soon after, some of these governments got into problems including wars, military rule, and several forms of natural and human calamities. In the 1990s, Africa started breathing some clean air of democracy. Some countries like Niger, Benin, Mali, Zambia elected their first Presidents. South Africa, a real success story also came on board. Ghana and Nigeria, which had had several years of military rule also elected Presidents.

The African transitions to democracy from the late 1980s were quite varied and characterized by progress, blockages, and reversals. In many countries, the transitions occurred quite rapidly following the onset of internal protests and external pressures on the incumbent autocratic régimes. At first, the protests and pressures were not taken seriously by many of these régimes, which responded with both repression and reform, depending on the relative strengths of the pro-democracy forces and the régimes themselves. The latter always sought to manipulate differences within the opposition; indeed, by the mid-1990s many African leaders had learned to play the new democratic game of multiparty electoral politics to their advantage.

As African countries moved toward electoral democratization in the 1990s, many countries remained basically authoritarian, but incorporated some democratic innovations to one degree or another. Thus, the rules for authoritarian régimes changed in fundamental ways so that such régimes differed markedly from the autocracies of the earlier post-independence period (Tripp, 2004, p. 3). The most prevalent political system in Africa today, notwithstanding important democratic advances, is the electoral authoritarian regime, which ranges from non-competitive, as in the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), to competitive, as in Uganda (Joseph, 2011). Thus, in conjunction with the use of

co-optation and repression, ruling parties hold *de jure* competitive elections to claim what is termed autonomous legitimation (Morgenbesser, 2017). This denotes the feigning of conformity to the established rules of the constitution and the shared beliefs of citizens.

In context of promoting liberal democracy in the Third World, the liberal tradition has been carried forward by Western countries in three different models of liberal democracy, drawing upon different aspects of the liberal heritage. The first model stresses the strictly liberal elements of liberal democracy, that is, a limited role for the state in an economy guided by market principles and open to international exchange (Sørensen, 1998). That is the version of liberal democracy behind the first generations of structural adjustment programs (SAPs), although the view is not expressed in these terms in the World Bank publications because the bank sees itself a neutral, non-political player. The state is viewed as a problem or a constraint rather than a positive player in economic, social and political development.

### **Decolonisation and Emergence of Autocratic Rulers**

The colonial powers imposed a political system on the African states which is directly copied from the Western model of democracy but alien to African people. The lack of articulation between modern democratic systems and ancient cultural traditions may help to explain the failure to embrace democracy. Fanon criticized the authoritarian attitudes of the African elite, which usurped young states in the course of decolonization, and their abuses of power when securing privileges for themselves and turning entire states into instruments of control. His early warnings went largely unheeded, however. Not until the 1990s, when the shortcomings of revolutionary movements could no longer be ignored, did Fanon's analyses come back into the foreground (Melber, 2008).

The myth of African rulers as intrinsically undemocratic and tyrannical permeates the frequent references in Western media and books to dictators like Robert Mugabe, Idi Amin Dada, Jean Bedel Bokassa or Mobutu Sese Seko as "African big men", "African strong men" and "African despots". The journalists and writers who use these expressions are often well-read, educated and informed people (Aboa-Bradwell, 2013). During the first few years of independence many observers were optimistic about the prospects for enduring democratic rule in Africa. This view was underpinned by the expectations aroused by the allure of self-determination and the credentials of nationalist leaders who had used democratic arguments to press for an end to colonialism. In a number of countries, especially those formerly governed by Britain and France, liberal constitutional arrangements had been created during the twilight years of colonial rule to facilitate the transfer of power, although these were subject to protracted bargaining and consultation between the colonial rulers and nationalist leaders before agreement was reached (Healey & Robinson, 1994).

When liberation movements in the so-called third world took up arms, they enjoyed support from the socialist countries as well as solidarity movements in the West. Organisations such as the PAIGC, MPLA, and FRELIMO challenged Portugal's colonial power. Their resilience in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, Angola and Mozambique even had repercussions in the Lisbon Metropole. They triggered the Carnation Revolution, bringing an end to Portuguese colonialism in Africa in the mid-1970s (Melber, 2008). Contrary to the expectations of the more optimistic observers, the experience of liberal democracy in independent Africa proved to be short-lived. Within a few years of achieving independence, the trend had shifted in favour of authoritarianism, with the elimination of political competition and the creation of one-party states either by constitutional fiat or by military takeover (Healey & Robinson, 1994).

Post-independence African history is instructive in understanding the scourge of the one-man, and the curse of one-party rule in Africa (Alemayehu, n.d.). Before the mid-1980s, African political systems were dominated by authoritarian regimes and African political thought was preoccupied with developmentalism: how to overcome the challenges of development through socialist-or capitalist-oriented strategies. In the 1960s, many leading political scientists even applauded the one-party state as a vehicle for nation-building and economic development; it supposedly minimized societal conflicts and conformed to African cultural traditions and a preference for consensus politics. Several prominent African political leaders and thinkers- Julius Nyerere of Tanzania (1922–1999), Leopold Senghor of Senegal (1906–2001), Sekou Touré of Guinea (1922–1984), and Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana (1909–1972)- argued passionately that African socialism not only represented a creative and

viable fusion between the “communal” values and practices of pre-colonial African societies and Western socialist ideas, but that it embodied and ensured democracy.

With the exception of a few countries, Africa had been incurably infected by Nkrumah’s one-man, one-party virus before the end of the 1960s. Most of the leaders of the newly independent African countries followed Nkrumah’s political formula by declaring states of emergency, suspending their constitutions, conferring unlimited executive powers upon themselves, and enacting oppressive laws which enabled them to arrest, detain and persecute their rivals, dissenters, and others they considered threats at will (Alemayehu, n.d.).

### **Regime-types explained**

The need for order and justice, equity and respect for human dignity and liberty heralded governance, governance brought various forms of governmental systems, several of which had been practiced before the emergence of modern democracy (Omotosho, n.d.). The Economist Intelligence Unit’s democracy index identifies four categories of regime: full democracy, flawed democracy, hybrid and authoritarian. Its 2015 index shows uneven progress in sub-Saharan Africa. The index only awarded full democracy status to Mauritius, a quiet achiever with strong rule of law (Kweifio-Okai & Holder, 2016). The Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index defines four different regimes that exist across Africa thus:

<b>Type of regime</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Full democracy	Basic political freedoms and civil liberties are respected, and tend to be underpinned by a political culture conducive to the flourishing of democracy. The functioning of government is satisfactory. Media are independent and diverse. There is an effective system of checks and balances. The judiciary is independent and judicial decisions are enforced. There are only limited problems in the functioning of democracies
Flawed democracy	Free and fair elections and even if there are problems (such as infringements on media freedom), basic civil liberties will be respected. However, there are significant weaknesses in other aspects of democracy, including problems in governance, an underdeveloped political culture and low levels of political participation.
Hybrid democracy	Elections have substantial irregularities that often prevent them from being both free and fair. Government pressure on opposition parties and candidates may be common. Serious weaknesses are more prevalent than in flawed democracies– in political culture, functioning of government and political participation. Corruption tends to be widespread and the rule of law is weak. Civil society is weak. Typically, there is harassment of and pressure on journalists and the judiciary is not independent.
Authoritarian/Nominal democracy	Political pluralism is absent or heavily circumscribed. Many countries in this category are outright dictatorships. Some formal institutions of democracy may exist, but these have little substance. Elections, if they do occur, are not free and fair. There is disregard for abuses and infringements of civil liberties. Media are typically state-owned or controlled by groups connected to the ruling regime. There is repression of criticism of the government and pervasive censorship. There is no independent judiciary.

*Source:* Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index 2014

Over the last forty years, one of the significant advances in democracy building has been the growth in the number of democracies in which competitive elections determined government power. These increased from only a quarter of the world's countries in 1975 to two thirds in 2016 (Electoral Integrity, 2017). Hence, today, the number of democracies significantly outnumbers the number of autocracies and the great majority of democracies created after 1975 still remain democracies today (Electoral Integrity, 2017). Even at that, the state, its institutions and the ruling party exert a lot of influence on the electoral process, so that in most cases, elections actually offer people no real choice, or any opportunity to participate in the political process (Obi, 2008). Two sets of reasons account for the fragility of democracies in sub-Saharan Africa – those that are extrinsic and those that are intrinsic to political and institutional settings. The first include low socio-economic development, conflict and insecurity; the second include weak institutions, lack of judicial independence, manipulation of electoral laws and constitutional norms, as well as serious limitations of civil and political rights. In practice, authoritarian regimes have become skilled at using a façade of legality to legitimise their grip on power.

### **Is Democracy Alien to Africa?**

In the first decades of Africa's independence, many of the continent's leaders and intellectuals rejected Western-style, free-market democracy. As earlier noted, they viewed one-party rule as more compatible with traditional African governance and regarded socialism as more conducive to economic development and social justice. Multiparty systems, according to these leaders, could only slow down development, while capitalism amounted to a continuation of colonial rule (Jost, 1995). Sandbrook (1985) argues that personal rule has undermined governance in a number of ways. First, it stultifies effective decision-making by eroding the independence of the bureaucracy and promoting the misallocation of scarce public resources. As a result, corruption and inefficiency have become systemic features of African bureaucracies.

Under conditions of personal rule, bureaucratic accountability cannot be enforced in the absence of constitutional restraints or an influential business class. Secondly, the political requirements of regime and personal survival take precedence over and even contradict policies designed to promote sustained economic growth. Thirdly, personal rule fosters a climate in which decisions are taken on the basis of short-term political considerations or for self-aggrandisement, with little regard to the longer-term consequences.

Many contemporary authoritarian regimes in Asia and Africa are in societies that have strong ethnic and/or religious and regional divisions and inequalities, which contribute to polarization. Some have increasing numbers of frustrated and educated young people who are unable to find gainful employment, and can thus be readily mobilized for protest. Engaging young people in political organizations, parties and other institutions- not merely in street demonstrations- is a major challenge to governance in many countries, including long-established democracies (Lowenthal & Bitar, 2015:42). When governments have been authoritarian, they have good reason to fear political competition and the possible loss of power. Authoritarian rulers commonly used public power to acquire private wealth, seizing land, appropriating shares in firms and financial institutions, and extorting bribes from those they rule. Were they to be deprived of the defenses available to those in office- command of the police, the jails, and the office of the public prosecutor- they would become vulnerable to reprisals. As democratic forces mobilized, then, so too did efforts to repress them (Bates, n.d.).

Elections are important as an integral part of the democratic process globally and post-independence African politics and have assumed utmost importance in the course of recent democratisation processes (Nohlen, Krennerich, & Thibaut, 1999). The popular movement for democracy in Africa revolved around three major demands: a) abolition of the one-party state in favour of democratic pluralism; b) decentralization of power i.e. greater local autonomy; and c) respect for human rights and the rule of law by African governments. This was not simply an expression of general disillusionment with independence whose leaders had failed to deliver but a revulsion against African governments which had become unbearably autocratic and oppressive (Mafeje, 1998). Kankindi (2017) alludes to the fact that liberal democracy conceptually promotes individualism which is in stark contrast with the basics of the African society based upon solidarity and hospitality. This is due to its major principles of absolute

freedom and equality, which remain theoretical and impossible to translate into tangible response to people's needs. For Kankindi (2017):

Saying liberal democracy, today, means a certain number of things that some people call features of liberal democracy, others call its values, others its characteristics, and so on. They include the rule of law; citizens' rule; majority rule, minorities' rights, individual rights; regular free and fair elections; democratic representation; freedom of speech, freedom of association and pressure groups; pluralism understood as distribution of power between competing groups, i.e. mainly political parties; freedom of religion; equality as equal opportunity to develop potential and equal say in government matters.

In 2014, the findings of the survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 34 African countries, published, were clear: Seven out of ten Africans (71%) prefer democracy over any other form of political regime (See Yabi, 2015). The index of demand for democracy measured by Afrobarometer in sixteen countries in 2002 and 2012, including both citizens' expression of support for democracy and their rejection of all forms of autocratic regimes (military regimes, single-party systems or personal dictatorships), has risen significantly (by fifteen points) in a decade. These findings show that democracy continues to gain ground in people's hearts and minds despite the insufficiencies and failings of democratisation experiences in a number of countries over the past decade, and despite uneven performances by democratic regimes in the areas of economic and social development, and even political stability and human security (Yabi, 2015).

Almost a decade after however, Afrobarometer's 48,084 face-to-face interviews in 34 African countries in 2019-2021 suggest that as people see levels of corruption rising in their key governing institutions, they grow increasingly dissatisfied with their democracy (Keulder & Mattes, 2021). On average across the 34 countries, almost six in 10 respondents (58 percent) say corruption in their country increased "somewhat" or "a lot" over the past year. And almost two-thirds (64 percent) say their government is doing a "fairly bad" or "very bad" job of controlling corruption. While average levels of public support for democracy across Africa have remained high, satisfaction with the way democracy works has plummeted over the past decade- to just 41 percent across 34 countries. This downward trend is pronounced even in some countries once considered leading democracies on the continent, including Zambia (-31 points), South Africa (-29 points), Cabo Verde (-22) and Mauritius (-22). Also, the desire of African political elites to capture state power, and by extension state resources for themselves and their cronies, has fuelled the quest to secure election victory at any cost. Reflective of the democratic backsliding observed on the continent in recent years, some of the elections conducted are little more than political theatre – aimed at garnering a fig leaf of legitimacy for leaders who arguably lack a popular mandate. Thus, while regularity of elections is improving, their quality remains a serious concern, affirming the mantra that elections do not always lead to democratic progress.

It is not all a grim picture after all in spite of the recent unconstitutional changes of government in five African countries. As posited by Tungwarara (2014), elections have become the predominant mode for contesting political and state power in Africa. After forty largely uninterrupted years, the holding of elections- a device inherited from the latter years of the colonial period and subsequently imposed from outside as a condition of Western aid- has become fundamental to the conduct of politics across the continent. For instance, between 1990 and 2020, there were nearly six hundred presidential and legislative elections. Every state has had periodic votes at the national, regional, or local level, with one exception: the dictatorship of Eritrea (Jacquemot, 2020). Recent elections in Nigeria (2011 and 2019), Ghana (2012 and 2016), Kenya (2017), Liberia (2017), Sierra Leone (2018) and Malawi (2019) gave rise to new dynamics in election dispute management and potential threats to stability. The resort to judicial processes to contest election results in these cases is, obviously, a progressive step forward from the extra-judicial means used in the past to contest and change electoral outcomes (Oduro, 2020).

In Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Nigeria, Zambia, Malawi, Rwanda, Senegal, Somaliland and Ghana, electoral commissions have all introduced biometric technology-which recognises fingerprints and facial features - to draw up new electoral registers (Wrong, 2013). In all, 28 countries on the continent now use biometrics to generate voter rolls. While most countries use fingerprinting, technologies are becoming increasingly sophisticated (Debos, 2021). A 'clean' register, the theory goes, eliminates thousands of 'ghost' voters who sit unnoticed on



manually compiled registers. It prevents over-voting and ballot-stuffing, two favourite rigging techniques (Wrong, 2013). Put differently, the use of biometric technology by EMBs in the registration and authentication of voters has helped to counter voter fraud and enhance the credibility of electoral registers.

Above all, it has been affirmed that African societies were not devoid of participatory forms of democracy before they were colonized (Ahere, 2021). In fact, Ayittey (2005) posits that African societies had participatory forms of democracy, rule of customary law, and accountability with traditional rulers that were not as despotic as typified by colonialists to justify their civilization campaigns in Africa. The political structures that different pre-colonial societies had were based on widely accepted cultural norms whose aims were to ensure that people lived together peacefully and that social order was maintained (Ahere, 2021). Today, citizen's dissatisfaction with the way democracy is working has led to stronger demands for accountable and representative government (Cheeseman, 2021).

### **Democracy, Civil Society and the State in Africa**

While the state has responsibility in the provision of social justice, citizens also have responsibility in this process. The state, therefore, has the further responsibility of creating an enabling environment for the citizens to realise their potentials as well as benefit from the social justice system in the country. This is perhaps why national constitution making is significant as it sets the institutional boundaries for the activities of both the state and its citizens, and establishes the mechanisms for government activities and the protection of all elements of social justice (Kura, 2008).

Clearly, the struggles for democracy in the 1980s and 1990s represented the latest moment of accelerated change in a long history of struggles for freedom, an exceptionally complex moment often driven by unpredictable events and new social movements and visions, anchored in the specific histories, social structures, and conditions of each country. During the struggles, national, regional, and international forces converged unevenly and inconsistently, and economic and political crises reinforced each other, altering the terrain of state-civil society relationships, the structures of governance, and the claims of citizenship.

The African continent, according to the Economist Intelligence Unit, is home to only one fully fledged democracy, Mauritius. The list, which takes into account things like electoral procedures, civil liberties, and political participation, classified seven African countries as "flawed democracies," 13 as "hybrid regimes," and 23 as authoritarian regimes (Kuo, 2017). Sub-Saharan Africa's overall "democracy" score on the index has remained flat for the last five years, according to the EIU index. Improvements in political participation and frequency of elections have been counteracted by crackdowns on civil liberties and media suppression, the report notes.

The discourse of democracy views states and civil society as necessary tools, templates and theories of development, thus creating these identities where lacking. As non-state actors, CSOs, be they Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), Trade Unions, Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and Religious Organisations, have presented alternative voices that have often demanded accountability on the part of the government. The proliferation of CSOs in most African countries began in the late 80s and early 90s when combined pressure from the various sectors forced the authoritarian regimes to conform to the New World Order following collapse of the Soviet Union. The emergence of the CSOs as alternative voice to challenge single party dominance was necessitated by the fact that most Countries in Africa had outlawed multi-party politics thereby making the CSOs the only alternative voice against such regimes (Owuor, 2011). Electoral engineering and blatant election fraud have long stifled the democratization process, nevertheless civil society is gaining momentum from the wave of pro-democratic demonstrations sweeping across the region.

### **Conclusion**

While assessments of democratic consolidation, based solely on elections, have been criticized for risking "the fallacy of electoralism" (Karl, 1989), it should be stated that democratization process in Africa is one area which needs a new approach (Khamis, 1996) because even when elections and democracy are not regarded as synonymous, elections nonetheless remain fundamental, not only for the

installation of democratic governments, but for broader democratic consolidation. In essence, two major ways to guarantee that power actually belongs to the people are to ensure that the political representatives emerge from within the parameters of democratic electoral procedure and process and that those elected use their offices to address the development needs of the citizens and that of the country at large. According to Aboa-Bradwell (2013), implementing genuine democracy in the African continent will be far from easy, and will take a very long time in many states. For it will mean fighting to replace the corrupt, uncaring elites bequeathed by the post-colonial system with new, principled and conscientious leaders, and the corrupt elites will resist that as fiercely as possible.

The strengthening of rule of law institutions is central to efforts to create an enabling environment for democratic politics. Enforcement officials must adopt a professional policing culture that protects and serves citizens impartially. Many observers also emphasize the need to strengthen the private institutions, including an independent press, corporations and trade unions, that make up what political scientists call “civil society” (Jost, 1995). Most African countries are only beginning to build the elements of civil society needed to sustain a democracy. Also, for many African countries, a more urgent need is to contain the bitter, sometimes violent political conflicts that are often fought along ethnic or religious lines.

Democratic principles must be at the heart of development agendas and should inspire how the future is imagined, presented and implemented. Democracy for African nations would not only be of humanitarian benefit to the people of Africa, but is an absolute necessity if the nations of Africa are to join the mainstream of the global economy. Democracy will not solve many of the problems that African countries face, but with a democratic form of government, where citizens freely and regularly choose their leaders and participate in decision-making, a foundation for more smooth transition toward development will be possible.

Creative thinking on the part of Africans and the international community alike is needed regarding the administration of elections in many African countries. Assistance to the electoral process should continue to be an important component of external support for African states undergoing democratic transition. As Muna (2015) suggests, to address the governance deficit in the continent and strengthen the transition to democratic governance, African countries must improve their electoral processes; ensure alternation of power; establish independent electoral commissions; constitutionalize institutions of accountability; and strengthen the African Peer Review Mechanism along the four main pillars of democracy and political governance, economic governance and management, corporate governance, and socio-economic governance.

To the pragmatic defenders of the liberal model, such as Jibrin Ibrahim and Peter Anyang' Nyong'o (1995), democracy rests solidly on a multiparty system and periodic electoral contests to promote the trinity of good governance: efficiency, accountability, and transparency. Their critics have charged that this model offers a mechanism of elite competition, recruitment, circulation, and control but presents limited benefits to the often atomized and powerless citizenry. A modified version incorporates the development imperative, the need for Africa's emerging democracies to “bring development back in”. The fundamental condition to arrest the present democratic reversal is to ensure that there are strong and credible opposition parties that are ready to govern. This will require political parties that are willing to dialogue with each other, able to mobilize youth and women, organized in a democratic and representative manner that represents all the diverse groups. There is also the need to address why elections and the electoral system have failed to provide mechanisms for alternation in power and for holding leaders accountable to the electorate. Finally, as aptly suggested by Mbaku (2021), African countries must work hard to make certain that their governing processes provide citizens with the tools (e.g., an independent judiciary; a free press; free, fair, transparent, inclusive, and credible elections) to effectively guard the exercise of government power and force governments to be accountable to the people and the constitution.

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