Democracy in Africa: Problems and Solutions

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Prodemocracy reforms hit Africa like a tidal wave in the 1990s, sweeping away authoritarian regimes and the one-party system that had dominated the African scene since independence. They began with the 1988 riots in Algiers and the 1990 release of Nelson Mandela after twenty-seven years in South Africa's prisons. For the most part, changes came about because both military and civilian governments had failed to alleviate poverty, unemployment, and oppression and had not provided their citizens with such basic services as health, housing, and education. Administrative inefficiency, political corruption, economic mismanagement, and social decay had further undermined the authority of autocratic leaders and national institutions.[1] These unpalatable conditions led to popular demands for reform throughout Africa.

The African opposition was encouraged by events in Europe, namely the crumbling of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and the demise of the Soviet Union.[2] African demands for political liberalization also got a boost from the West and international financial institutions. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other Western donors refused to help African governments deal with their deteriorating economies until economic and political reforms were put in place. Moreover, the end of the Cold War took the wind out of the Soviet Union's foreign aid program. Moscow was no longer able to provide economic assistance to

1. James R. Scarritt and Shaheen Mozaffar, *Towards Sustainable Democracy in Africa*, Working Paper in African Studies 171, Boston University's African Studies Center, 1993, 10.
2. Brendalyn P. Embros, *Democratization and the Protection of Human Rights in Africa: Problems and Prospects* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1995).

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socialist-ruled African nations. Thus, both external pressure and Africa's ailing economies paved the way for the wave of global democratization. The rise of democracy in Europe on the ashes of communism encouraged the African opposition to step up their own campaigns against authoritarianism and to press for the establishment of more open and participatory forms of government.

Extensive mobilization of civil society took place in many African countries. Students, professional and civic associations, trade unions, church leaders, women's groups, human rights organizations, and others spearheaded the protest against authoritarian regimes.[3] They blamed the one-party system for the terrible conditions in their societies and called for greater political freedom and open electoral politics to increase the government's transparency and accountability. Popular protests, demonstrations, and riots forced several autocratic rulers out of office (for instance, in Ethiopia and Mali) and compelled others to heed popular demands for political reforms (in Benin, Kenya, and Malawi).

My purpose in this essay is to examine the democratization process in Africa and to highlight some of the problems it encountered. The essay illustrates the challenges of changing political systems and of attempting to restructure state institutions to carry out new functions. It also proposes solutions intended to give democracy a chance to survive in societies that are ethnically diverse and that do not have traditions or experiences with democratic institutions or culture.

Political Liberalization

Several transitions to democracy are under way in Africa. Many countries completed the initial phase of the democratization process by legalizing opposition parties and holding multiparty elections in the 1990s; twenty-five countries held competitive multiparty elections between 1990 and 1993. In eleven countries, most notably South Africa and Zambia, opposition parties won and came to power, "but elsewhere, the legalization of opposition has not brought democracy."[4]

3. Larry Diamond, "Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 3 (1994): 5.
4. Larry Diamond, "The New Wind," *African Report* 39, no. 5 (1994): 51.

Political liberalization is still finding its way to some African countries. After fifteen years of military rule and political oppression, Nigeria, the continent's most populous country and possessor of huge oil resources, finally held free elections and returned a civilian government to power in May 1999.[5] The new president, Olusegun Obasanjo, a former military ruler, is committed to upholding democracy and to encouraging citizens to have a role in their government. However, the future of democracy in Nigeria depends on his ability to solve many chronic problems, including corruption, ethnic violence, unemployment, and crumbling infrastructure.[6] Failure to deal with these issues effectively might undermine the success of democracy.

In nearby Ghana, opposition leader John Kufuor, defeated in 1996 by President Jerry Rawlings, won a runoff election in December 2000 against the ruling National Democratic Congress candidate, Vice President John Atta Mills. This was Ghana's first real transfer of power through the ballot box. It also marked the end of two decades of domination by Rawlings. Following his inauguration, Kufuor called on the international community to extend debt relief to help revive his country's ailing economy.[7] He, like other African leaders, believes that the survival of democracy depends on whether the newly democratic governments can meet the expectations of the masses for better employment and services. This can hardly be accomplished without debt forgiveness.

Angola, Mozambique, and Namibia are unusual cases. They differ from other African countries because democracy did not emerge from popular revolts but as part of negotiated settlements to end a civil war. Their democratization, brought about by extraneous circumstances, left them susceptible to both internal and external forces without any real mobilization of democratic will.

Despite the imposed change, both Mozambique and Namibia were able to make a smooth transition to democracy. Each has held two consecutive democratic elections. In each country, the ruling parties, Frelimo and Swapo, respectively, were re-elected, and the main opposition parties have fully cooperated in making democracy work. However, this was not the case in Angola. The country's first and only multiparty electoral competition, in

5. Ann M. Simmons, "Civilian Leader Vows New Era for Nigerians," *Los Angeles Times*, 29 May 1999.
6. Tim Sullivan, "In Nigeria, Democracy Takes the Stage," *Washington Post*, 25 November 1999.
7. Kwaku Sakyi-Addo, "Opposition Candidate Wins in Ghana," *Washington Post*, 30 December 2000.

1992, did not bring about political stability or peace. Many factors made it difficult for democracy to take root in the war-torn country, including

1. a power struggle, fueled by ethnic rivalry;
2. foreign intervention and meddling in the country's internal affairs;
3. broken peace agreements;
4. failure by one of the parties to abide by democratic rules;
5. a warlord who preferred to fight rather than compromise;
6. the recent shift of the superpowers' attention away from Africa; and
7. a return to a full-scale war prior to the ending of United Nations operations.

These factors undermined the efforts to democratize Angola and took the country back to war.

It is clear that elections and electoral transfer of power remain one of the weakest links in the democratization process in Africa. Opposition parties have boycotted the elections in a number of countries, and losers have refused to accept electoral defeat, which they routinely attribute to electoral fraud—real or imagined. Several factors may explain this weakness. First, there are legal and material constraints that political parties face in an election campaign. Second, some incumbent regimes too easily manipulate the terms of an election. Third, there is a zero-sum character to competition.

The Lingering Military Threat

Another setback in the democratization process is the role of the military in many African countries, especially its tendency to move against elected regimes. Algeria offers the most egregious example. The military refused to allow the winner of the 1991 legislative elections, the Islamic Salvation Front, to come to power and in January 1992 forced President Chadli Benjedid, who had spearheaded democratic reforms, out of office and named a new president, who suppressed all political parties. As a result, armed conflict has destabilized the country, and attacks on civilians, including journalists, have continued.[8]

8. Mohamed El-Khawas, "Revolutionary Islam in North Africa," *Africa Today* 43, no. 4 (1996): 396–7.

Recent events have shown that the military has been a constant threat to democracy all over Africa. Military officers have not hesitated to overthrow a democratically elected government and replace it with a junta. In several African countries, they suspended the constitution, closed the legislative assembly, and banned political parties, leaving themselves in charge without being accountable to the people or their elected representatives. This pattern occurred in Burundi, Gambia, and Sierra Leone in the mid 1990s.[9]

Over the years, Niger has had several coups. In 1996, political instability led the military to overthrow the democratically elected government because the president and prime minister could not work together. Moreover, Niger had another military coup in April 1999, during which the civilian president, Ibrahim Bare Mainassara, was killed by presidential guards. He was replaced by a junta headed by the commander of those guards, Major Douda Mallam Wanke. Upon taking control of the government, he promised to return the country to civilian rule and to hold free and fair elections in the near future. Seven months later, he held multiparty elections because foreign aid was being withheld from Niger until democratic rule was restored.[10] This is a rarity, because military leaders often do not give up the reins of power easily.

Côte d'Ivoire is a troubling case of the military role in government. Decades of stability were shattered in December 1999 when a military coup ousted an elected government and put General Robert Guei in office. He drafted a new constitution and used the courts as an effective weapon against his opponents, thereby improving his chance of winning the presidency in the upcoming elections, which he held only because of international pressure. He got the supreme court to disqualify Alassane Quattara, the former prime minister and a senior IMF executive, who was his most formidable challenger. The court also disqualified most other opposition candidates, leaving only Laurent Gbagbo of the Ivorian Popular Front to challenge Guei. These court actions caused the other opposition elements to boycott the elections.[11]

9. Richard Joseph, "Africa, 1990–1997: From Abertura to Closure," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (1998): 8.

10. Dalatou Mamane, "Turnout Low in Niger to Replace Military Junta," *Washington Post*, 25 November 1999.

11. Douglas Farah, "Fearful Immigrants Flee Tensions in Ivory Coast," *Washington Post*, 7 February 2001.

Despite the low voter turnout, General Guei lost the elections. Instead of accepting the results, he initially tried to hang on to power, but he was driven from office by street demonstrations. At that point, the army sided with the people, forcing Guei to quit. He opted to leave the country. The ascension of Gbagbo to the presidency in October 2000 did not end the power struggle, however. His failure to include the leading opposition leader, Quattara, in the government meant there was trouble ahead and did not serve the cause of democracy. On 7 January 2001, armed mutineers tried unsuccessfully to overthrow the newly installed government. Furthermore, Gbagbo's failure to address human rights violations committed by the military has ignited ethnic enmity between the Muslim north and Christian center and south, ushering in a new era of intolerance and instability.[12]

In Côte d'Ivoire and other countries, the fragility of democratic institutions raises serious questions about whether Western democratic structures are best suited for a highly segmented nation. Africa might benefit from South America's experience regarding the transition from military to civilian rule, especially when the transitions in South America strengthened the state and enhanced its capacity to meet the needs of the people. To eliminate the military threat, it is essential to establish civilian control over the military. This is easier said than done, of course.

Institutionalization of Democracy

Multiparty electoral competition is only one step toward establishing democracy. Other tasks must be completed to create conditions that will lead to the rule of law and guarantee a broad range of civil liberties to all citizens. This aspect of democratization is being implemented slowly and unevenly among African countries, because it requires institution building and huge resources to make changes and to train people to perform new roles. As Jean-Germain Gros put it, the main goal of institutionalization of democracy is "to make intrastate and state-society relations more balanced. Separation of power . . . checks and balances, administrative decentralization and accountability, freedom of speech, press, assembly, and . . . civilian hege-

12. Ibid.

mony over the military are some of the components of the second phase of democratization."[13]

In the current drive to strengthen and consolidate the institutional foundations of good governance, a major focus must be on the key institutions of the state—the executive, the legislature, and the judiciary. The following review of the changes needed in these branches of government should shed light on the difficult task that Africans are facing in completing the democratization process.

The Executive

In most societies, the concept of authority has long been patrimonial. Power was personalized, wherein the office of the presidency and its incumbent were inseparable. There was little or no institutionalization of the structures and procedures of governing. Such personalization of power went hand-in-hand with executive dominance in African politics. As a result, the prevailing forms of government have involved personality cults, nepotism, suppression of dissent, and the use of private armies, spies, assassins, or thugs to harass the opposition and to shore up the autocratic regime. Under such systems, the concept of separation of power, with its checks and balances, was nonexistent. There was no commitment to constitutional government or a role for civil society to play in the political process.

The first necessary step is to distinguish the office of the president from the person occupying it. This means that the executive becomes less dominant overall and more accountable to other branches of government and to the people. Second, an equilibrium must be established among the executive and other key state institutions, especially the legislature and civil society. The executive role also must become more transparent.

It is clearly a challenge to incorporate democratic values and principles into the culture, including such aspects as:

1. legitimate power or authority that emanates from the people, who exercise it through elected representatives;

13. Jean-Germain Gros, *Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century in Africa: Coping with Uncertainty* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1998), 3.

2. rulers chosen by the people and accountable to the people;
3. citizens' rights to participate in the management of public affairs; and
4. citizens' rights to change a government that no longer serves their interests.

The Legislature

Under a one-party system, legislatures generally lost their oversight role and became a rubber stamp for the president. The power of the legislature was eroded as the executive controlled the legislative agenda and directly issued decrees and executive orders. Elections were often self-serving through plebiscite or marred by fraud. Civil society was too weak to play a credible role in governing because of the suppression of civil liberties and administrative detention. Free speech, free press, and the right to organize were severely curtailed. There was an absence of political pluralism.

Reforms must restore the legislature's oversight role. It is an essential aspect of good governance that the legislature serve as a constraint on executive and judicial excess or abuse of power, thus supporting the rule of law. The following strategies can be used to strengthen the legislature:

1. Establish good operational procedures for the parliament and its subunits in order to increase efficiency and productivity.
2. Enhance the legislative and management skills of its members. Professional associations can conduct training workshops or programs on how to prepare legislation and conduct investigations.
3. Develop greater public awareness of the work of the legislature and its significance. This can be done by broadcasting parliamentary sessions on national radio and television, opening committee hearings to the public, holding town meetings in each district, or having newsletters sent to constituents.
4. Exercise legislative oversight over the executive through the powers of impeachment and require legislative authorization for budget matters and spending.
5. Form budget and appropriations committees, essential for exercising control over public funds.

6. Appoint parliamentary committees and subcommittees to act as watchdogs of different governmental activities. They can hold hearings on specific issues or on the appointment of top officials.
7. Have regulatory agencies also serve as arms of parliament and conduct a comprehensive accounting of government finances for the legislature. An office of auditor general is well placed to enforce the requirements for good governance, such as transparency and accountability.

The Judiciary

The judiciary has often been the weakest point in the chain of governance. The shortage of skilled personnel has been one obstacle, but political and financial crises also have diminished its effectiveness. All too often, the judiciary has been one of the weakest links in the interface between state and society. This is especially evident when authoritarian rulers use the courts as weapons to silence opposition and to cling to power.

Being a judge has been risky in Zimbabwe. In March 2001, Chief Justice Anthony Gubbay was forced to resign after the government refused to provide the court with additional security following death threats. President Robert Mugabe has faulted the court because of its ruling that the government's land reform program was illegal and because it upheld an opposition challenge of the last election results in some precincts. In contrast, the democratization of Benin ushered in a new day for the courts. Its constitutional court displayed its independence in ruling on the outcome of the presidential election in 1996, forcing President Nicephore Soglo to accept his electoral defeat and to hand power over to the winner, former president Mathieu Kerekou.[14]

It is urgent to restore the judiciary's independence and to ensure that it remains free from politics or interference by either the executive or the legislature in order to perform its rightful oversight function. A judiciary's main task is to interpret the laws passed by the legislature and render judgment on whether government actions are within the law.

14. E. Gyimah-Boadi, "The Rebirth of African Liberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 9, no. 2 (1998): 28.

The following strategies are recommended to strengthen the judiciary in order to enable it to carry out its responsibility:

1. Create an enabling environment for attracting and training highly qualified persons as judges.
2. Make the appointment of judges the responsibility of independent judiciary commissions appointed by the executive with the approval of the legislature.
3. Build capacity among lower magistrates by raising salaries, providing training, and improving working conditions, including the provision of better facilities, equipment, and resources.
4. Make the process of adjudication timely, not only in criminal matters, but also for commercial and property claims.
5. Impose fewer filing requirements, to lower the cost of access to justice.
6. Enhance professionalism through training.

Foreign donors can provide training, infrastructure, and financial resources to develop and strengthen the independence of the judicial systems in Africa. For example, in fiscal 1994 the U.S. Agency for International Development allocated $119.3 million to support governance programs in Africa.[15]

With an independent judiciary, the rule of law will be upheld, and equal protection under the law will prevail. Citizens should be able to assert their right to participate in politics through free and fair elections, decentralized governmental structures, and nongovernmental organizations.

Power Sharing and Decentralization

Recent events have shown that Western democratic structures are not functioning well in several African nations. In Benin, for example, democratically elected president Soglo sidestepped the legislature and resorted to issuing decrees. His move derailed democracy, and the people did not forget it. When the next election came, they denied him another term. He lost the election to his predecessor, Kerekou.

Africans might need to develop their own political structures to account

15. Diamond, "The New Wind," 52.

for their own realities, namely, large peasant populations, ethnic cleavages, and low economic development. Because of the ethnic diversity within African society, a winner-take-all electoral system might not be the best. The losers are left out of power and have no stake in the system. They often reject the election results and resort to violent conflicts. Power sharing may suit the African situation better and help avoid civil strife and renewed civil war. It can bring all leading political parties together to share power, assuring the losers and their followers that they have access to state power and resources, therefore making them feel secure. As a result, power sharing can promote national reconciliation and help a country draw up a joint agenda to guide national development. This means that African leaders might

1. mandate broad ethnic representation in the government,
2. ensure ethnic and regional balance in the party offices and nominations from different regions,
3. ban ethnic and religious parties, or
4. require a broad distribution of support for election of the presidency.

Another strategy is to move away from the highly centralized form of government common in Africa, in which all decisions are made by the chief executive. Centralization was a feature of the patrimonial state and went hand-in-hand with the personalization of power. This system can lead to inefficiency and low morale, with little interest being shown by bureaucrats in serving people. Local officials are often left with little to do.

Some form of decentralization may be the best strategy to manage Africa's ethnic diversity and to encourage grassroots participation. The transfer of power to elected regional and local governments will allow each region to use its resources for the benefit of the local population and give people more control over government action. Decentralization could lead to improved service delivery, along with increased efficiency and productivity, and may accelerate economic and social development at the regional and local levels.

Many problems confront decentralization policies, including the lack of resources, the lack of trained personnel at the local and regional levels, and the lack of administrative and support structures. The following strategies could help remedy this situation:

1. Develop an appropriate legal framework for the transfer of powers to regional and local governments.
2. Provide local leaders with training in strategic planning, marketing, and management.
3. Develop local entrepreneurship to create local jobs and wealth.
4. Implement regional development programs to build economic and social infrastructure.
5. Make resources available to transfer power to local and regional governments.

Decentralization is an appropriate strategy for strengthening local and regional administrations as basic institutions of development and good governance. Two positive developments during the past decade have facilitated good governance. First, there has been a rapid and widespread evolution of a culture of freedom, especially freedom of expression and association. People are not afraid to discuss public policy and criticize government decisions. Newspapers and other publications are mushrooming all over the continent. Civil society organizations have been set up for advocacy and service delivery with respect to human rights and economic development.

Second, national conferences have been conducted, with the potential to help consolidate the institutional foundations of good governance. Such conferences offer a democratic gathering of all social forces in a nation; they are a combination of a constitutional convention and a truth and reconciliation commission. They conduct a review of the country's history, with emphasis on the political and economic crimes that helped erode the state's capacity for social and economic development. The review is followed by a new constitutional framework based on the rule of law, a new political process oriented toward national reconciliation, and an economic strategy for reconstruction and development. A good example was the Conference for a Democratic South Africa, which designed the transition from apartheid to a nonracial political system. Another was the Ethiopian political-forces meeting in 1991 in Addis Ababa, intended to adopt a political framework for the post-Dergue era. In national conferences, all sides are heard and disputes are aired and solved peacefully. Here, emphasis is on consensus, not unanimity or majority decisions, which are hallmarks of one-party systems and Western democracy, respectively.

Conclusion

Democratization is a process that needs time to be fully implemented. As has been pointed out, it is "bound to be gradual, messy, fitful, and slow, with many imperfections along the way."[16] This has certainly been true in Africa. During the 1990s, many African countries made advances in democratization by reforming their political systems. Political parties do exist; multiparty elections are being held. Nevertheless, many regimes have not implemented other measures necessary to complete the transition to democracy and expand civil liberties. Some incumbent leaders are still maneuvering to stay in power by excluding others. They manipulate the state apparatus to retain power in subsequent elections. This situation has led to much popular frustration, because people do not see significant differences between the old and the new systems. In many cases, voters have opted to stay away from the election polling stations, because they feel no empowerment. Low voter turnout has meant that a small percentage of the population elects the president and the legislature.

Elections have also led to ethnic conflicts, leading to the rise of factionalism. In some nations, the losers have refused to accept electoral defeat, accusing the incumbent regime of rigging the elections. In others, the ruling party has used the courts to eliminate serious challengers to its own victory. The winner-take-all model has presented a serious problem that, in the long run, may undermine the success of democracy in Africa.

Some steps can be taken to help make democracy work in Africa. A power-sharing formula or some form of decentralization, for example, might be a more suitable African strategy, because of the continent's ethnic diversity and the desire to increase grassroots participation in the political process. These and other measures might help create conditions for democratic ideals and institutions to grow and to guarantee civil liberties to all citizens.

16. Crawford Young, "The Third Wave of Democratization in Africa: Ambiguities and Contradictions," in *State Conflict and Democracy in Africa*, ed. Richard Joseph (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 1999), 25.