Analysis of Failure of Democracies in Africa

Abur, Aondoaver Jacob
Department of Sociology
Federal University, Dutsin-Ma
Katsina State, Nigeria.
aabur@fudutsinma.edu.ng

***Abstract* – The western model of democracy is considered by many Africans to be extremely narrow and even alien to African cultures. Democracy is not just about the right to vote and be voted for, but it is about a whole complex of rights and duties that citizens must exercise if government is to be open and accountable and. Despite the rapid spread of liberal democracy in Africa there have been failures where all the opportunities are right for success. This paper in its analysis of the failure of democracies in Africa explores the views of the modernization theory in general and the culturalist perspective in particular which argues that African traditional political institutions are autocratic, personalized and corrupt, and therefore cannot provide appropriate historical and cultural formulation for democracy in modern societies. Relying on secondary data from journals and other literary sources, the paper disagrees with the modernization and culturalist perspectives and argues that Africa's colonial experience displaced the indigenous democratic practices and replaced them with first, dictatorship and subsequently, western liberal democracy which was and has continued to be alien and as a consequence has been failing across the continent. The paper therefore, recommends that the path to democratization in Africa must be home grown and that outsiders should only help move the process forward.**

***Key Words:* liberal democracy, failure, culture, colonialism, Africa.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Democracy may not be universally practiced nor uniformly accepted but democratic governance has achieved the status of being taken to be generally right in the general climate of the world opinion. Until the 1990s, majority of countries in Africa were dominated by dictatorship, one-party and patrimonial states, a lack of transparency and accountability of the leaders, social inequalities and injustice, all of which led to instability and civil wars along ethnic and religious lines.

The democratization process in Africa coincided with the collapse of communism in Soviet Union and the end of the cold war, but after more than twenty five years of democratic experience in Africa, its practice can be summarized as been rather sloppy, haphazard, retrogressive and failing. Various reasons including cultural backwardness, multiplicity of ethnic groups, weakness of social institutions, religious differences etc, have been advanced as been responsible for the failure of democracy in Africa. It is against this background that the paper attempts an analysis the failure of democracies in Africa with a view to ascertaining what democracy is, when it was introduced to Africa, how it has been practiced, whether it has been failing and the factors responsible for the failure and finally, the way forward.

II. CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

Democracy is viewed by many as a system of government by the whole population or all eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives. Oxford English Dictionary put it this way:

"It is a system of government in which all the people of a state or polity are involved in making decisions about its affairs, typically by voting to elect representative to a parliament or similar assembly"

Democracy is further defined as (a) "government by the people, especially rule of the majority" (b) "a government in which the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation usually involving periodically held free elections (Democracy-Definition and more from the free Merriam-Webster Dictionary).

Diamond & Leonardo (2004) assets that democracy consists of four key elements; these include:

- A political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections.
- The active participation of the people, as citizens in politics and civic life.
- Protection of the human rights of all citizens.
- A rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.

There are two basic types of democracy. These are; direct democracy and representative democracy and each has several variants which are all concerned with how the body of eligible citizens executes their will. Liberal democracy which is practiced across much of the world including Africa is a representative democracy with protection of individual liberty and property by the rule of law its central tenets.

In his argument on the conceptualization of democracy, Horowitz (2006) puts it that it was a mistake of the post-cold war global policy that the worlds only super power (The United States) has committed to, rhetorically and militarily, promote a political system that remained undefined. The

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

polarization in democratic theory debate, as well as the divergence in measurement outcomes demonstrates a lack of consensus on how democracy should best be conceptualized. Some scholars contend the very definition of democracy as ‘’the rule of the people’’. David Held cited in Monga (1996) claims it comes with many underlying implications and wonders, “rule?” - “rule by?” - “the people?” To begin with the people; who are to be considered the people? What kind of participation is envisaged from them? What conditions are assumed to be conducive for participation? Can the disincentives and incentives, or cost and benefits of participation be equal?

The notion of the rule of the people has been disputed from democracy’s Greek inception. Plato and Aristotle looked at it with contempt while for the sake of political order they favored aristocracy since the “rule of the people” is inherently corrupt and unstable. It is important to note that the liberal perspective of democratic equality originally included in the concept “the people” only property owners who represented approximately ten percent of the population. The difference with the ancient perception is that in modern times, democracy “is no longer in its historical manifestation, to the ideology of progress” and is based on universal right of individuals while it was based on citizens participation in public affairs for the ancients (Benoist, 2011). Thus, democracy represented rather a theoretical proposal for balancing the might of sovereign states with the rights of individuals.

III. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theories in the social science are constructs that are used to explain phenomena in the social world. Ake (2002) avers that the central issue in discourse on democracy in Africa is whether it is feasible in Africa considering the region’s social and economic conditions. Academics and international development experts have, assessed the issue from different perspectives. On the part of western scholars and analysts, the issue is the failure of the western model of liberal democracy and the absence of positive signs of democratic consolidation in most African countries. Most of these arguments are rooted in the modernization theory of development (Rostow, 1960). The theory was mostly used to explain economic development in particular societies but it has over the years gained a strong policy implication in politics and cultural studies. The major assumptions of the theory include;

- Modernization is a phased process; for example Rostow five phases in his theory of economic development for particular societies suffices.
- Modernization is a homogenizing process, in this sense, we can say that modernization produces tendencies toward convergence among societies, for example Levy (1967) maintains that as time goes on, they and we will increasingly resemble one another because the patterns of modernization are such that the more highly modernized societies become, the more they resemble one another.
- Modernization is a “Europeanisation” or “Americanisation” process; in the modernization literature, there is an attitude of complacency towards Western Europe and United state. These nations are viewed as having unmated economic prosperity and democratic stability (Tipps, 1976).
- Modernization is an irreversible process, once started modernization cannot be stopped. In other words, once third world countries come into contact with the West, they will not be able to resist the impetus towards modernization.
- Finally, modernization is a lengthy process. It is evolutionary change not a revolutionary one. It will take generations or even centuries to complete, and its profound impact will be felt only through time. All these assumptions are derived from European and American evolutionary theory.

There is also another set of classical assumptions based more strictly on the functionalism-structuralism theory which emphasizes the interdependence of social institutions, the importance of structural variables at cultural level, and built in process of change through homeostasis equilibrium. These are ideas derived especially from Parson’s sociological theories. These assumptions are as follows:

- Modernization is a systematic process: the attribute of modernity forms a consistent whole, thus appearing in a cluster rather than in isolation.
- Modernization is a transformation process : in order for society to move into modernity its traditional structures and values must be totally replaced by a set of modern values.
- Modernization is an imminent process due to its systematic and transformative nature, which builds changes into the social system.

It is based on the classical assumption of modernization theory that the culturalist scholars in their attempt to analyze the failure of democracies in African focus on African past and tradition, including the implications of its overwhelming culture of informality on African polities (Chabal & Daloz, 1999). This perspective is concerned with the “re-traditionalisation of society” and “instrumentalisation of disorder” frameworks and its emphasis on autocratic tendencies, corruption, chaos, anarchy and violence, all of which are wrongly linked with the traditional (Bayart, 1996; Bayart et al, 1999; Ellis, 2005).

Chabal and Daloz (1999) have argued that the state in Sub-Sahara Africa is nothing other than relatively empty shell. They argued that the real business of politics is conducted informally and stealthier outside the official political realm. They conclude that within such a political order in which there

IJBAMR

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

is meaningful institutionalization, the notion of corruption as often defined by the West is of little significance. Their argument just like that of modernization theorists implies that pre-colonial culture inhibited political development through uncivilized values and practices which serves as the bottle neck to the emergence of democratic governance hence the search for anti-democratic and anti-developmental traits in cultural tradition of African states (Onoge, 1997).

The position of the culturalist perspective on democracy in Africa is that; African traditional political institutions are autocratic, personalized and corrupt, and therefore cannot provide appropriate historical and cultural formulation for democracy in modern societies. In contrasts however; Fortes and Evans- Pritchard (1987) argued that traditional African society's governments are open and inclusive. They pointed out that the structure of an African state implies that kings and chiefs rule by consent and that rulers subjects are as fully aware of the duties he owes to them as they are of the duties they owe him and are able to exert pressure to make him discharge these duties. Evidence abounds to show a history of transparent and accountable governance in traditional African societies. Yoder (1998) noted a political culture that abhors corruption among the Kanyok people of Southern Congo (the famous Luba story in which the Kenyok approve of community spirit and deplore selfishness show the anticorruption content of political culture of the Kenyok people.

IV. DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS IN AFRICA

Democracy has been an enigma in contemporary Africa. Although variants of democracy (direct and participatory democracies and representative monarchies) evolved independent of the highly publicized Athenian democratic tradition in African politics in pre-colonial times (Uchendu, 1965:39-41; Achebe, 1958:10-11 & 192-97; Kenyatta, 1938:196; Aderibigbe, 1965:193-201), the European penetration and subsequent colonization provided a gateway for prevalence of western forms of democracy with the practice of presidential and parliamentary systems.

Debates on Africa's democratization processes and prospects has centered on four interrelated issues; the relative roles of

- Internal and external factors
- Historical and contemporary dynamics
- Structural and contingent factors
- Economic and political dimensions

Argument for internal factors as the reason behind democratic transitions tend to underscore the strength of domestic political protests and pro-democracy movement engendered or energized by the failures of development, the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, and the disintegration of the post colonial state's legitimacy and capacity. Arguments for external factors/forces point to the decisive impact of the end of the cold war, the demonstration effects of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and imposition of structural adjustment programs and political conditionalities by Western bilateral and multilateral financial institutions.

Proponents of the two approaches tend to place Africa's transition to democracy in different historical contexts, either in terms of global waves of democracy or in African histories of struggle for freedom. Advocates of the first approach tend to see Africa's democratization as a part of what Huntington (1993) calls the third wave democracy which began in the 1990s. Others have argued that, while African democratization was influenced by developments elsewhere in the world, it was primarily rooted in the continent's long history of struggle against slavery, colonialism, and post colonial misrule.

Along that line, Salih (2001) gave names to some historical period of democratization in Africa: the "first wave" (1950s-1960s), involving the struggles for independences from colonial rule; the "second wave" (1980s-1990s), involving the coming to grips with post-colonial misrule; and the "third wave" (2000-present), involving new ideas of civil society relationships, structures of governance and norms of citizenship. Thus, African democratic struggles are linked structurally and symbolically to the rich reservoirs of the earlier struggles against exploitation and oppression.

Observers do not agree on the extent to which democratization is a product of structural factors as opposed to individual actions and events. Proponents of the structural analyses dwell on the structural conditions that has forestalled and facilitated and might sustain or frustrate democratization. These include colonial legacies, levels of economic development and education, size of the middle classes, the nature and vibrancy of civil society and impediments imposed by the global system. Proponents of the individual actions on the other hand stress the role of specific leaders, closely following the ebb and flow of events and tailoring their interpretations accordingly. Their focus tends to be on contingent factors, the unpredictability of development and human agency. The future of democratic project in Africa (positive or negative) is often based on how these pre-conditions are evaluated.

V. FAILURE OF DEMOCRACIES IN AFRICA

We have noted in the previous section of this paper that some variants of democracy existed in Africa before European invasion and colonization however, the European colonial occupation and the resultant colonial rule disrupted these political systems. Europeans mystified themselves in the eyes of Africans through force and outright condemnation. African culture and innovations were systematically debased whether or not they approximated Europeans ways. Fanon (1967:32) in buttressing the above assertion stated that:

IJBAMR

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

"The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values…he is the corrosive element destroying all that comes near him; he is the depository of maleficent power, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces."

The establishment of colonial rule witnessed the appointment of governors from the metropolitan European capitals sent to rule over Africans. These governors were either military officers or career public servants, who had little or no regard for African tradition and values, political or cultural. Colonial governors and administrators were allowed wide powers to administer colonial subjects on behalf of their home governments. They were empowered to use all necessary means to "tame" and bring the "savages" under control. This meant issuing arbitrary ordinances without consultation. Since the colonial administrators owed their loyalty to those who appointed them, they became very dictatorial, ruling by decree and incarcerating African without due process of law (Nwauwa, 2003). With this system of imported governors with absolute powers, the existing indigenous democratic values were undermined and replaced with the dictatorship of colonial governors. Whenever it suited the colonial governors, they would create and impose chiefs with new, even if insignificant powers over societies that never experienced chiefly autocracy. This sort of arbitrary action by the colonial officials disrupted the political traditions of Africans, resulting in protest and riots among many groups like the Aba women's riots of 1929 in southeast Nigeria. Some African chiefs who were co-opted into the colonial administration became mere errand boys for European officials. When the colonial government began to employ the concept of legislative council, individuals persons, mostly chiefs, were appointed as representatives for their various peoples while the educated elite where ignored. Unfortunately, the dictatorship and wanton brutality as well as the political and other institutional structures laid by the colonial governors was adopted by African nationalists and later imitated by African post-independence leaders.

As noted in the previous section, we established on one hand that the push for democratization was occasioned by internal dynamics and contradictions in many African states. Joseph (1997) on the other hand describes the domination of the world economy by the market-oriented economies, the geostrategic hegemony of the western-industrialized nations, and direct or indirect external pressures for democratization. The post-cold war era offered the west and in particular the United States of America the unique historical opportunity to impose its political and economic values across the globe with Africa as its prime target. Western democracy and democratization became the precondition for African countries that sought foreign aid and loans, especially from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in order to solve their political and economic challenges. This led many African countries including some highly autocratic regimes to embrace or more appropriately, alter their governance structure to bear some semblance of liberal democracy. The west turned a blind eye to respect for the fundamental freedom of thought, expression and assembly, free competition among political parties, violation of the rule of law, etc (fundamental principles of liberal democracy) by some of these regimes all in the bid to sell and promote democratic growth on the continent.

In most African countries, democracy has become synonymous with conduct of periodic elections not minding the quality of these elections. In its 2009 report, the Economic Commission for Africa's (ECA) African Governance Report (AGR) stated that:

"Since the foundational elections of 1980s, there have been numerous elections in Africa, but many countries have not had quality elections. Over all, there has been notable progress on political governance in some countries, while improvements have been blunt or reversed in others. On balance, the progress on political governance has been marginal (ECA 2009)."

Indeed, there have been many similar assessment and evaluation reports on democracy and governance in Africa by other international donors as well as a growing number of anthologies on the failure of democracies in Africa.

The May 13th 2015 failed coup and the crisis that ensued in Burundi, the heightened political tension in the Democratic Republic of Congo due to president Kabila's refusal to leave office after the expiration of his tenure 2016, the forceful removal from office of long serving leaders of the Gambia and Zimbabwe, Yahya Jammeh and Robert Mugabe, the 2010 and 2007 post-election crisis in Ivory Coast and Kenya respectively lend credence to the failure of the electoral process and by extension, democracy in Africa. Other circumstances that provoke serious concern is the seeming life terms of Heads of States such as Paul Biya in Cameroon, Yoweri Museveni in Uganda and Eduardo dos Santos in Angola which all suggest a decline in democratic gains in Africa.

The problems identified above can be attributed to the version of liberal democracy introduced in Africa which has essentially been indifferent to the nature and character of the state. Its practice has produced a social context in Africa that has continued to work against the emergence of democratic developmental state in various countries and region. Experimentation with the liberal model has been primarily about how democratic elections will help determine who will be chosen by the people to exercise the power of the state. The consequences have been the survival of a state that lacks autonomy yet dominate and supervises the political process. This has serious implications for democratic development as substituting democrats for dictators through multiparty

IJBAMR

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

elections has not and will not bring about democratic progress in Africa.

VI. CONCLUSION

The idea that Africa's search for democratic governance is incomplete but alive is a truism for many African scholars. While a variety of theoretical approaches have been employed by different scholars to explain the failure of democracy in Africa it inevitably leads to the same conclusion; the path to democratization in Africa must be "home grown" and that outsiders can only help move the process forward. In line with that, Makinda, (1996) proposed that democracy should be conceived as a way of government firmly rooted in the belief that people in any society should be free to determine their political, economic, social and cultural system. But the form it takes can vary according to the particular circumstances of any society. A broader concept of democracy should include what Maillu, (1997:255) refers to "cultural definition of democracy" in which African democracy "like philosophy, had to be lived, theories left aside." For him, African societies were socially and politically structured so that "everybody participated according to his ability, ages-statues, and wishes; everybody was invited to offer the cooking of his mind. African democracy therefore, should transcend the realm of politics; it should constitute an integral part of the people's culture which allows everyone a sense of belonging. It must be practical democracy as opposed to theoretical democracy; which requires people to be more sensitive and responsible for their neighbours wellbeing.

VII. THE WAY FORWARD

Many Africans consider the western model of democracy to be extremely narrow and even alien to African cultures. Democracy is not merely the right to vote and seize power. It is about a whole complex of rights and duties which citizens must exercise if government is to be open, accountable and participatory. Liberal democratic practice in Africa has been paradoxical; there are failures where all the opportunities are right for success, and there are successes where one would least expect them.

The democratic success story recorded in Botswana is a good example for the rest of Africa to learn from. The country has had a reputation for democracy, political stability, sound economic management and good governance. This opinion is widely shared by foreign governments, international financial institutions, organizations such as Freedom House and Transparency International and even academics.

Botswana operates under a system of indigenous African Democracy (The Kgotla) that dates back to the fifteenth century. The "Kgotla" like the "Ubuntu" community concept are both holistic and rooted in African humanism. Before any big decision, the leaders consult the general population. There is a culture of hearing the views of ordinary people. The custom of allowing everyone their full say is carried over into meetings of all kinds, from discussing a bill in parliament to a staff briefing. Akintoye (2009) also noted similar practices within the Yoruba traditional political system. But the continuum of the Yoruba indigenous system of governance including others across Africa was historically truncated by the advent of colonialism. Botswana however, has managed not only to sustain its traditional democratic system (Kgotla), but it has also infused same to governance at all levels. This is attributed to its famed reputation as one of the best democracy in Africa.

REFERENCES

[1] A. Benoist, The Current Crisis of Democracy, in *Telos*, vol. 2011 no. 156, 2011 pp. 1-23

[2] A. Nwuawa, The legacies of Colonialism and the Politics of the Cold War, in *Africa*. Vol. 5, Modern Africa, ed. Toyin Falola. Dorham : Carolina Academic Press, 2003

[3] A.A.B. Aderibigbe, People of Southern Nigeria," *in A Thousand Years of West African History: A Hand Book for Teachers and Students*, ed. J.F Ajayi & Ian Espie. Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1965, pp 193-201

[4] C. Achebe, Things Fall Apart. New York: Anchor 1958, pp 10-11 & 192-97.

[5] C. Ake, The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa. Dakar: Council forDevelopment of Social Science Research in Africa, 2000

[6] C. Monga, Anthropology of Anger: Civil Society and Democracy in Africa. Boulder: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1996

[7] D.G. Maillu, African Indigenous Political Ideology: African Cultural Interpretation of Democracy. Nairobi, Kenya, 1997 pp. 255

[8] D.C. Tipps, Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective", in Black Cyril E. (ed). *Comparative Modernization.* New York: Free Press, 1976

[9] D.L. Horowitz, Constitutional Courts: A Primer for Decision Makers," in Journal of Democracy, Vol. 17, no. 4, 2006 pp. 125-37

[10] Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), African Governance Report (AGR) II. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009

[11] F. Fanon, The Wretched of The Earth. New York: Penguin, 1967 pp.29, 32, 51

[12] J. Bayart, S. Ellis & B. Hibou, The criminalization of the State in Africa, 1999

[13] J. Bayart, The State in Africa: The politics of the Belly. London & New York: Longman, 1996

[14] J. Kenyatta, Facing Mount Kenya: The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu. London: Secker and Warburg, 1938 pp. 196

[15] J. Yoder, Good Government, Democratization and Traditional African Political Philosophy: The Example of the Kanyok in Congo. Journal of Modern African Studies 36(3): 1998 pp.483-507

[16] L. Diamond & M. Leonardo, The Quality of Democracy. An Overview, Journal of Democracy, 2004

[17] M. Fortes & E.E. Evans-Pritchard (eds) African Political Systems. London: Kegan Paul International, 1987

[18] M. Levy, *Social Patterns and Problems of Modernization.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1967

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

[19] M. Salih, *African Democracies and African Politics*. New York: Pluto Press, 2001
[20] Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Democracy-Definition and more from the free Merriam-Webster Dictionary.
[21] O. Onoge, The Democratic Imperative in Africa. Claude Ake Memorial Lecture Series NO. 1 Jos: Africa Centre for Democratic Governance, 1997
[22] Oxford & Bloomington: International African Institute in Association with James Currey & Indiana University Press
[23] Oxford English Dictionary
[24] P. Chabal & J. Daloz, Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument. Oxford & Bloomington: International Africa Institute in Association with James Currey & Indiana University Press 1999
[25] R. Joseph, Democratization in Africa After 1989: Comparative and Theoretical Perspective", *in Comparative Politics,* Vol. 28, No.3, 1997
[26] S. Ellis, , How to Rebuild Aafrica. *Foreign Affairs* 84(5), September: 2005, pp. 135-148
[27] S. Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in The Late Twentieth Century. Norma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993
[28] S.A. Akintoye, The Democratic Foundations of Traditional Yoruba Government. www.YorubaNation.org , 2009
[29] S.M. Makinde, Democracy and Multi-Party Politics in Africa. Journal of Modern African Studies 34, no.4, 1996, pp. 557
[30] V.C. Uchendu, The Igbo of South East Nigeria. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965 pp. 39, 41
[31] W.W. Rostow, The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto. London: Cambridge University Press, 1960.

IJBAMR

This is an open access article under the CC BY-SA 4.0 license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)