

**THEORIZING DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATIZATION IN AFRICA:  
FAULT-LINES IN PRAXIS**

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**Abstract:**

*Democracy as widely practiced in Africa contemporarily, has posted sundry outcomes spanning from the absurd to the banal. It is a borrowed Western liberal ideal that has proven increasing hard-fit and a tough sell in most locations across Africa. The causal factors for this dysfunction here can be located at the nexus of the rather infertile grounds of cultural heterogeneities and inter-group incompatibilities on which it has been supplanted courtesy of Africa's awry colonial heritage. As experienced in most state instances, in praxis it has yet produced the kinds of handsome dividends for the masses as recorded in the advanced countries. Thus, whilst the elites have increasingly grown richer and have become all-too powerful in their various state instances, the masses have been grossly and callously impoverished over time. Despite its huge resource endowments, majority of African countries have been persistently ranked very high in the global poverty*

*index perennially by international financial institutions. This attests to the degree of squalor Africans have been sentenced to due to bad governance initiatives and inept leadership in their various states. This paper interrogates fault-lines in the processes of democracy and democratization in selected locations across Africa. The paper anchors its analysis on the Jacksonian and Lijphart's Consociational Democracy models. The paper concludes that, for democracy to grow well in Africa, there is a dire need to indigenize such an ideal with a view to bringing it in synch with Africa's traditional specificities exemplified by administrative compactness and the ethos of communalism as ensconced in the notion of a 'development democratic system' for Africa.*

**KEYWORDS: Democracy, Democratization; Dual Publics, Resource Endowment, Poverty**

### **1. Introduction**

Democracy has been widely acclaimed as a useful approach to civic governance. Such a universalism seems to have held true to form mostly in the advanced Western liberal world. General trends elsewhere seem to indicate a very sharp departure from such a standard norm given the contrary records posted in its implementation in the mostly non-Western countries. As it were, this problematique seems to have been owed largely to attempts to define its conception and indeed attempts at its operationalization from the standpoint of a dire need to do so undiluted and without any form of re-adaptation needed to bring it in synch with other cultural specificities in far flung locations.

This paper argues that, a definition of democracy and democratization ought to be culture bound given the variations of requirements for their applications across the world – especially, in the so-called Third World regions. It is therefore erroneous to assume that the meanings of these concepts ought always to be universal and to be so expressed a generic universalism tandem with Western liberalist idealisms. That societies in the Third World differ fundamentally from those in the advanced Western world, only amplifies the need to also reflect variations in the meanings of such basic operational terminologies as it were in theory and practice. In this instance, democracy can therefore be perceived ideally as a political system that should be premised on the conduct of periodic elections as the only means for effecting political changes as well as the ideal carriage for implementing social justice and equity for all composite groups. In addition, this conception needs to come in synch with the operating cultural norms and the pre-existing traditional institutional arrangements in such non-Western locations. It is from this threshold that that other conception of democratization would then imply a process of installing democratic institutions as well as cultivation of democratic idealism within a state based on the extant and pre-existed time-tested institutional arrangements in such locations.

Huntington (1991) is one of the principal proponents of Western-styled liberal democracy. He asserts that, liberal democracy consists of “the principal offices of government [that] are chosen through competitive elections in which the bulk of the population can participate. Democratic systems thus have a common institutional core that establishes their identity.” Euben (1993) on defines it as, “largely a matter of choosing among elites in periodic elections [that is] between the ratio (power, rule, master) by the demos.”

But as it were, such generic definitions, it would seem, abstract sharply from what obtains in other non-Western locations that are still claiming to be democratic in their own rights. This creates a dilemma for analyses in this area. It is a dysfunction what Parekh (1993) likened to the dilemma of defining democracy in the ‘straight jackets or parsimonious limits of Western liberalism.’ In any case, Ake (1998) attempts a definition from an *Africanist* standpoint and advances a radical departure from Western styled liberalism when he posits that, democracy is “a powerful, objective, historical force .....that .....expresses the desire of ordinary people to gain power and material improvement”.

However, the need to deviate from the generic Western liberalist notion of democracy and democratization process actually inheres in the fact that applications of democratic ideals and prosecuting democratization processes in locations such as we have across Africa, Nigeria in particular, has presented us with mixed outcomes that detract sharply from trends in Western countries. As is most evident across Africa, we have often recounted stories of immense pains and miseries experienced by the citizenries in these post-Colonial states. The enabling conditions are just not ripe yet for a smooth take off of these universal models as it were in their undiluted frames. Consequently, the series of transition processes recorded overtime, have become quite faulty since they tee-off most times from military rule, whereas, the prevalent presence of the praetorian guards ideally owe roots in the arbitrary manners of Colonial state building processes in Africa. A genuine transition ought to begin from pulling down the awry legacies of Colonial rule (Ovie-D’Leone, 2013).

Ake (1993) has highlighted in vivid terms some of these trends when he infers that: “the foundation upon which African democracy movement is based is the bitter disappointment of independence and post-independence plans – the development project being a prime example.” One reason for this could be the different meaning attached to democracy by Africans. Thus, while many African leaders see democracy as an open ticket to enrich themselves and their family members, the general populace really see no difference between it and the long years of authoritarian military rule. This largely accounts for the relative unwholesome mass indifference exhibited towards the democratic process across Africa.

As it were, for democracy to be fruitful any where across Africa, there is a dire need to radically re-jig it to conform to Africa’s traditional specificities of administrative size compactness and devolution of power-resources nexus at the grassroots. This will re-enforce as well as help to harness the eufunctionality of Africa’s ethos of ethnicity and communalism as basis for any modicum of practical civic governance. As it were, the basis of Western liberal democracy tendentiously ascribe a wide ambience for political, economic as well as social rights to the citizenry, albeit, in praxis Africans have tended to de-emphasized economic rights both for the individuals and the group. On strategic consequence of gross misrule across Africa has been a drastic economic decline owing largely to illicit and high spate of corruption in the public space.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

The Jacksonian (1776) view of democracy is privileged here. It advances the notion that democracy as a functional system, it rests on five essential tenements consisting of: the fundamental worth and dignity of every person; the equality of all persons; reliance on majority rule with adequate ambience for minority rights; and the need and strategic import of political compromise to avoid undue rancour. To this menu, this paper will add Lijphart's (1979) notion of Consociational democracy that privileges power rotation between major ethnic groups and regional autonomies for the minorities. These two frames of analyses offer great utilities in the treatment of attempts at implementing the so-called liberal brand of Western democracy in highly heterogeneous societies as we have in Africa generally. This paper argues that, on the long haul, universalism of Western liberal democracy demands a radical re-jig so as to offer great ambience for social welfare ideals as well as opportunities to disperse developmental processes down to the grassroots. It is only by such a formula that equity and justice can prevail in the highly contentious environments of socialization across Africa.

### **3. Fault-lines in Operationalizing Democracy in Africa**

The ideal of Western liberal democracy has been operationalized in through sundry and varying models and equally so, with varying outcomes. Sklar (1983) insists that the history of democracy in Africa has shown that the continent has become a 'veritable workshop of democracy' since evidence now show that there does exist a series of ever-changing forms of governments in more than fifty sovereign states across the continent since time. And hence it is also an 'experimental process in a new generation' of Africa that could readily throw more light into the real meanings of the generic democracy as a concept itself. Thus far, the following typologies of analyzed hereunder exemplify sundry attempts made by African elites to operationalize Western ideals of democracy across the continent over time. Ideally speaking therefore, there have been five notable types of democracy practiced across the continent since the expiration of colonial rule between the late 1950s and late 1990s. First, we have the system of liberal democracy derived from the generic Western models as analyzed hereunder:

#### ***i) Africa's Liberal Democratic model***

This system typifies where "the powers of government are limited by law and citizens enjoy freedom of association to compete in free elections at regular intervals". (Sklar, 1983) Most of the regimes bequeathed to Africans by the departing Colonists were tailored along these lines. But as it were, the internal structures and mindset also bequeathed to Africans were ideally not suitable for such a system to flourish on the long haul. As Sklar (1983) also rightly observes, "all but a few of them, however, were rudely swept away by military coups, political usurpations, and constitutional changes shortly after (or within a decade of) independence". Generally speaking, it would seem Africans have not been able to fully imbibe the ideals of liberal individualism obviously at the centre of such generic Western democratic idealism. Naturally, Africans are largely paternalistic and communal in their orientations. And hence it has always been extremely difficult in Africa for an incumbent regime to willingly hand over power to the opposition when they are defeated in a national election. The general reading has always been that by handing over to a winning opposition is tantamount to abdicating power to another ethnic group. Therefore, the general preference in most locations has often been a type of 'democracy without any

real party competition or opposition and consequently, perpetuity in power for the ruler and his clansmen’.

**ii) *Africa’s Democratic Dictatorship Model***

This type of democracy borrows extensively from the dictatorship system. As Gregor (1979) infers, this is where “liberty is suppressed; labour is regimented and exploited; freedom of movement is curtailed; [and] personal choice is severely restricted”. It is a system of government where an elite rules with an iron fist over the entire citizenry whose personal and group rights are largely also subjugated to the whims and caprices of such a leader at all times. Here, the only notion of democracy stops at periodic elections – which are in such instances, not held to change such leaders, but merely act as annual rituals to help them to consolidate their iron-fist grip on power.

**iii) *Nigeria’s Federalist System***

The Nigerian model has produced a mixed outcome over time. As at independence in 1960, the country began as a unitary system with the three large regions of the North, the West and the East. Each of them equated the seat of the three major ethnic groups of Hausa-Fulani, Yorubas and the Igbos. But given inherent structural defects in that system and the ensuing squabble between the elites over power sharing formula at the centre, this resulted in a bloody 30-months civil war and the resultant jettisoning of the unitary system for a federal structure shortly after an initial structural overhaul was made to produce an additional Mid-Western region carved out of the old Western region. The federal structural arrangement took off in 1975 with a 12-state structure that later morphed into the current 36 states arrangement. One major fault-line in operationalizing this model has been the lack of fiscal federalism and centralization of national revenue sharing even though they are generated within states. This has overtime produced unhealthy inter-government relations between the states and Federal units and between States and local councils – where each higher level of administration has always tried to outsmart the subordinate level in the sharing formula. Several scholars have alluded to the utilities of federalism in the area of engendering national unity and economic competitiveness useful for sustained national economic growth.

As Sklar (1983:13) also observes rightly here: “truly federal governments are necessarily liberal governments, predicated on the division and restraint of power. In Nigeria, the rights of citizens and constituent states alike are protected by a staunchly independent judiciary. In fact, Nigeria is an exceptional legalistic society; many political issues of great moment are finally resolved in the courts, for example, the outcome of the 1979 presidential election. Nor did the courts lose their vitality under military rule”.

Ideally speaking however, the prospects of success of any type of regime in Africa could be tied dialectically to the notion of equality and justice in the distribution of national wealth amongst individuals and the competing groups both in the public and private spheres. Possibly, one reason why the Nigeria system has remained stunted is owe to the equally stark absence of enduring conditions of equity and justice in the allocations of national resources. It is therefore true that, “despite its apparent vigour, liberal democracy in Nigeria is debilitated by the effects of economic anarchy and social distemper. [It is a

scenario where] a small minority of the population is conspicuously wealthy and privileged while the vast majority seethes with discontent”. (Sklar, 1983:13)

The issue of social and economic, even political inequality in Nigeria like almost every other location across Africa, is owed largely to the awry patterns of social stratification during colonial times resulting in one ethnic group ascribed undue advantage over others and often resulting in weak institutional bases. Where there are weak institutional bases, corruption and pilferages of national resources in the public sphere become the norm. Most of the colonial institutions of government were largely intended to function only effectively with the colonists wielding the instruments of threat or force and visibly interposed in-between the precarious borders of inter-ethnic cleavages.

Therefore, the exit of the colonists left a vacuum too big to be filled by any one of the multiples of competing groups acting independently of others or acting in consort with others against the rest. Thus, in the absence of no histories of inter-group conquests, consensual agreements at the end of such wars or other consensual arrangements, no group has been ready to submit willingly to the unquestionable dominance of others at that vital centre of national mediation vacated by the colonists. Also, the issue of a general lack of equity and justice is tied to such nagging absence of a general consensus between the competing inter-group and inter-personal interests on the national stage.

### ***iii) Guided Democracy***

This is a notable variant of ‘developmental democracy’ and it is premised on the principle that “rulers should be accountable to their subjects but dispenses with the political method of multiparty electoral competition .....[and it is so] classified separately because the other forms of developmental dictatorship make little or no pretence of accountability to the people on the part of exalted persons or national saviours”. (Sklar, 1983)

In Africa, one location where such a system had been in operation was Kenya under the rule of President Jomo Kenyatta who was accountable only to himself all through his reign yet there were periodic national elections. Thus, in spite of the wide ban on multi-parties, Sklar (1983) describes trends under Kenyatta’s regime as a: “political process .....[that had] been highly competitive; the triumphal party itself has been described as a ‘confederation arenas’ where the bosses or rural factions ‘collide’ and ‘collude’ in their ‘perennial struggles’ for power (Jackson and Rosberg, 1984:103). And by early 1982, it was most evident also that Kenya had become a ‘one-party state de jure’ and where the apparent commitments of its citizenry to ‘guided democracy’ rather than liberal democracy had been fully consolidated (Jackson and Rosberg, 1984:103).

In any case, despite such wide ascription of the populace to ‘guided democracy’ as it seemed in the Kenyan trends under Kenyatta, just like every other democratic experiments across post-Colonial Africa, it was also doomed to failure on the long haul for its lack of public accountability no sooner Kenyatta left the stage. One crucial factor that could readily explain such a trend in the Kenya example is tied to the fact that most of the early nationalist figures who took over the reins of national governments from the colonists, were largely very popular at the onset and that helped them to assert their personal will upon the generality of the populace without much fuss. This was a feat which no other succeeding

national figures could match or surpass since the African post-Colonial political scene was inadvertently coloured by ethnic competitions in the subsequent stages of the democratization processes. After the first wave of indigenous rule ended, no one could afford the luxury of installing personal egoism over the medley of competing national ethnic political interests.

**iv) *Democracy with Accountability and Social Justice***

The failure of guided democracy as exemplified in the intervening trends in places like Kenya was generally linked to the absence of privileges of access to political power and public services as well as the lack of a wide ambit for popular participation in public decision making especially in the economic and political spheres. This also amplifies the need to go beyond the precept of accountability and helped rekindled the dire need to co-opt that other crucial element of ‘social justice’ into the democratic calculus. And in this light, democracy for Africa ought to be implemented as a system that caters for the social welfare of the people as well as a vehicle that advances their overall development generally.

But the Tanzanian model also crumbled due to the awry manners it was implemented. At the onset, Sklar (1983) infers that, the process of] ‘*villagization*’ [as exemplified by the Tanzanian model], has made it possible for the government to reach the entire rural population with basic services. However, the related aim of socialist farming – the collectivization of production – was, at first, deemphasized and then virtually abandoned in the face of peasant resistance, a food crisis, and the critical views of potential donors, notably the World Bank, at a time of dire need for foreign aids.”<sup>23</sup>

**v) *Participatory Democracy***

As Sklar (1983:15) also posits here, “participatory democracy is a product of the current era. It affirms the existence of a reciprocal relationship between democratic political institutions and participative social institutions, with particular emphasis upon the educative effects of democratic participation in the workplace [of which Zambia under President Kenneth Kaunda was a model]”. The goal here as Kaunda envisioned at the time, was to broaden the scope of democratic participation for all and sundry in all spheres of public life and up to the extent that “no single individual or group of individuals shall have a monopoly of political, economic, social or military power”. (Sklar, 1983:15)

The logic of this system is tied again to the notion that, when there is any form of monopoly of power, the larger good of the people general suffers at the end of the day. Personal rights are abused at will, personal and group freedoms are denied and trampled under wilfully. Also, the entire societal fabric is disjointed and the country gradually slides into anarchy due to intervening political unrests.

As Kaunda (1974:37) perceives these trends, under any form of monopoly, “the public interest suffers when politicians monopolize political power, or soldiers monopolize military power, or intellectuals and technocrats monopolize knowledge, or publishers and writers monopolize the power of pen, or workers monopolize power through strikes, or chiefs monopolize the power of tradition. Again, the Zambian model also faltered at the stage of its implementation. And as Sklar also observes, “the sole legal party has not become a truly popular institution. Membership in the party has dwindled to a fewer than five percent of the population despite its availability to Zambians without restrictions.”<sup>27</sup>

Viewed critically then, failure of the Zambian model could also be attributed to the authoritarian composure and carriage of President Kenneth Kaunda at the time which many critics tagged as been too 'commandist' and 'paternalistic'. This is what Tordoff (1980) also summarizes in these terms here: "ironically, no one emphasizes the virtues of participatory democracy more than the President himself, yet his own style of increasingly personalized decision-making renders its realization difficult".

The contradictions in the Zambian model were just too manifold for the system to survive for long. This is given the fact that the country had been a hotbed of public sphere activism especially in the labour sector during colonial times. It is true then to say that, "democratic participation [which Kaunda actually desired] is self-motivated and self-determined; it is not coerced. In Africa, participatory democracy implies a commitment to the self-motivated assertion of peasant and working class interests in political affairs. But the Zambian leadership has tried to induce popular participation into channels which would be controlled by a monopolistic political party. [And] from a democratic standpoint, however, induced participation comes close to being a contradiction in terms; indeed it is a form of coercion. And it has been rejected by Zambian workers and peasants". (Sklar, 1983:16)

At the end of the day, Zambia's democratic model under Kaunda faltered on the altar of crass personal egoism and the wilful choice of an ideology that largely abstracted from the main focus of the regime type chosen at the time. Observers assert that Kaunda's choice of a working ideology was not arbitrary, even though it was largely misdirected the way it seems. It is true (he asserts), that "scientific socialism marks a strictly logical progression in ideology for the ruling group of socialist inclination which intends to control the working class. It also signifies the maturation of basic tendencies toward an undiluted developmental dictatorship in Zambia". Kaunda (1974).

**vi) Consociational Democracy**

Many scholars believe that the Consociational arrangement appears to be perhaps one of the most feasible models of democracy that fits aptly into such highly divisive societies like we have in Africa presently. So christened by the Dutch political scholar – Lijphart (1979), it is generally regarded as a brand of liberal democracy which co-opts other ad hoc arrangements contingent on the dire need to protect the vital interests of minorities and cultural groups, especially in multi-ethnic societies like we have across Africa presently.

Consociational arrangements entail such provisions as proportional representation, power sharing and rotational power structures at the national levels especially between the major ethnic or culturally distinctive groups on one hand and the granting of autonomies to the minorities to run their affairs as they deem fit with the minimal interference from the other major groups. And as Lijphart (1979) asserts, one of the basic features of this arrangement is tied to the notion of 'the voluntary nature of cooperation among the elites who are largely the truest representative leaders of the main cultural groups' in any state'. Consociationalism is also defined in lucid terms by Macpherson (1977:44-76), as a term that readily designates "a stage in the evolution of liberal democracy, marked by the emergence, in theory and practice, of equal opportunity for 'individual self-development' [also likened to the utilitarian ideals of John Stuart Mills]".



Certain salient aspects of this system have been tested and with resounding successes in many locations across Africa over the years. In Nigeria for instance, the federal character principles and the notion of the six geo-political zones – which must be reflected fairly in every national allocation of public appointments for instance, are mechanisms tandem with the basic requirements of a Consociational arrangement. Recently, there has been successful power sharing schemes in Kenya at the national level bringing enduring peace to a war-torn country after a botched national election. Zimbabwe is still grappling with the logistics needed to fashion out its own model of power sharing arrangements between the opposition and the government.

The prospects for peace here are quite bright if only the political elites could sink their personal egos and pursue the public good. On the long haul, one could say generally that, Africans have made quite huge strides towards entrenching democratic ideals across the continent over the years. But the challenges they face are quite manifold and daunting though not so insurmountable as many apologias of the African scene would want to counter-argue. Thus, this group of scholarship infer that, instead of dictatorship or guided democracy in any of its many guises, a special preference for an enduring democratic process for Africa would then be a system that is focused largely on how to boost the economic developmental potentials of the continent in general. Sklar (1983) captures this succinctly here as: “developmental democracy could represent a synthesis of all that has been learned from the many experiments with simpler types [across the continent over time]. It would probably be liberal and social, participatory and Consociational all at once”.

Sklar (1983) however expatiates further that, “development democracy does not imply a specific formulation of democratic principles based upon distinctive core values, such as political liberty for *liberal democracy*, social equality for *social democracy*, popular participation for *participatory democracy*, or group rights for *Consociational democracy* [in essence, it must be varied and aptly reflect the unique features of each local setting where it is being implemented]”.

For the African context, it would seem development democracy will be best served by emphasis on two critical contingent variables: social democracy (predilections of civic governance system on social welfarist ideals) and economic development (a dispersal of gainful employment opportunities, public infrastructures and amenities right down to the grassroots). But then, if viewed against the backdrop of Nigeria’s rather lengthy democratization process, and talking in specific terms, what could be the basic features of Nigeria’s democracy as it were if one may ask here? These features are highlighted here in the following sub-sections.

#### **4. Blending Democratic Theory and Praxis in the African Context**

How do we then apply these concepts of democracy and democratization to Africa and to have the much desired benefits and positive results needed to put states on the continent on a sound and an endurable stable political footings on the long haul? As it seems, one practical way to do this is to adopt frameworks that remove the causes of social inequalities, intense inter-ethnic competitions for power, and through broadening access to power and

political participations for individuals and groups, as well as how to mitigate conditions of hunger and diseases through provisions of viable public infrastructures (Ovie-D'Leone, 2019). Viewed cumulatively therefore, these processes will consist of a compound of developmental ideals that should largely be entrenched across post-Colonial Africa. It is in this light that many scholars of the African scene have recently tended to link the notion of democracy and democratization to the dire need to boost the prospects for Africa's general developmental needs in virtually all sectors of national life.

Sklar (1983) for instance asserts that: "in Africa today, freedom from want is a universal goal. Millions of lives are blighted by the [harsh] effects of poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, untended illness, and inadequate education. In [virtually] all countries [across the continent], political leaders dedicate themselves to the cause of economic and social development. Most leaders also claim to respect the principle of accountability to the people. However, the imperatives of development are far more demanding than the claims of democracy [as presently being canvassed across Africa]"

## **5. Conclusion**

Recent reports about Africa have recounted a series of failing national economies, collapsing public infrastructures. These have all been due to endemic conditions of neglects, resulting also in pervading hunger, lack and endemic diseases all stemming from a spiral of political conflicts usually over crises in on-going processes of implementing post-Colonial political, economic and even social development exigencies. There is no doubt that the continent is at crucial cross-roads and urgently need auspicious restructuring to develop. Democracy does offer such an auspicious condition and as the current trends indicate, this should also be tied to the notion of Africa's developmental needs. Consequently, in the pursuit of this ideal, many models of democratization have been suggested for Africa in general. It should be emphasized here that no one model could be applicable without their adaptations to the intervening factors and operating parameters in each given state instance across the continent. Albeit, a broad framework that encompasses the notion of a '*developmental democratic system*' that premieres the twin variables social welfare and grassroots development could present us with perhaps an auspicious general guide here for the democratic re-birth of Africa on the long haul.

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