THE CHALLENGES OF e-DEMOCRACY
OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS

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Contents Table

1. INTRODUCTION ...........................................................................................................3
2. CONTEMPLATING e-DEMOCRACY: THE CONTEXT ..................................................5
3. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE: TOWARDS E-DEMOCRACY ....................................12
4. IMPACT OF e-DEMOCRACY: POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES ..................................17
5. CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS: CONCLUSIONS ...........................19
6. Bibliography ................................................................................................................22
1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the desirability and feasibility of e-Democracy in Africa. It assess the challenges, opportunities and risks of implementing e-Democracy, its impact on the societies and economies in Africa in light of the global and domestic challenges and demands confronting Africa as the 21st Century unfolds. Is e-Democracy a viable demand driven option or a prevailing supply-driven fashion?

The case for e-Democracy ---risks, challenges and opportunities---have to be viewed within the context of the needs and demands of Africans in a changed and rapidly changing world. Contemporary Africa at the outset of the 21st Century is radically different from that at the dawn of Independence in the mid-20th Century. So much has changed at both the domestic African nation-state level and at the global level. Since Independences two major revolutions have taken place: one is scientific and technological, and the other political and social.

The revolutions in information and communication technologies [ICT] have shrunk the world and rendered national borders irrelevant, and traditional legal and political sovereignties ineffectual. ICT has at once villagized the globe and globalized the village. The consumption patterns of one major country are now likely to affect the economies and political systems of other countries. ICT has transformed information and knowledge as the most critical factors in business transactions as well as in political decision-making processes. Business is now a 24-hours affairs. Those in business need accurate, up-to-date and the most relevant information to enable them to be competitive in the global markets. Policy-makers---politicians as well as bureaucrats---need the relevant information and knowledge from the private sector and civil society so that they can provide those engaged in productive and creative activities with the necessary supportive policy-framework to be efficient and competitive. Similarly, in order to be responsive and efficient in the delivery of services to the citizens governments need to have the necessary and relevant information from their citizens. Thus the creation and gathering of information and knowledge, the manner and speed in which they are disseminated and utilized are crucial to the efficiency of the economy and the governance of a country.

The decade of the 1990s was a unique period in modern African history. It brought into focus the interfacing of the aspirations and visions of various groups of people, and the frustrations and disappointments of unfulfilled promises of many other people. It witnessed the appearance of a new generation of young citizenry---most of whom were born after the Independence of their respective countries. They have been demanding effective participation in the decision-making processes. Insisting on institutional reforms and new constitutions to reflect the prevailing African realities, empowerment to enable Africans respond to the global challenges and opportunities, and new leaders who are accountable, transparent, competent, with integrity, honesty and commitment.

There is now emerging among African policy makers, the business community and civil society leaders a consensus on important current African issues and those that are likely to confront the continent in the 21st Century, and the manner in which they could be responded to. These issues include the importance of African ownership of the available, relevant and affordable policy options and commitment in their implementation for the development of the continent; conflicts prevention and resolution; the imperatives of an enabling environment of peace, security and...
stability conducive to the promotion of human development and global competitiveness; determination to participate actively and positively in the global markets of ideas, goods and services; the need for frank discussions about each others internal problems that might create insecurity in the neighbourhood; popular participation, democratisation, good governance and the need to forge partnerships with countries outside Africa in order to jointly promote these objectives. The Conference for Security, Stability, Development and Cooperation in Africa [CSSDCA], New African Partnership for Africa Development [NEPAD] and the transformation of the Organization of African Unity [OAU] into the African Union [AU] are indicative of the emerging consensus and commitments.

The paper is divided into five parts. Part Two dwells briefly on the context within which the contemplations for the promotion of e-Democracy—-the challenges, opportunities and risks—-could be meaningfully discussed. What needs to be done in order to implement e-Democracy is the subject of Part Three. The possible consequences—-or impact—-of e-Democracy on the African economies and societies are discussed in Part Four. Concluding comments reviewing the opportunities and risks entailed in the promotion and implementation of e-Democracy in Africa, the critical issue of whether e-Democracy is a viable demand-driven option or a prevailing supply-driven fashion are in Part Five.
2. CONTEMPLATING e-DEMOCRACY: THE CONTEXT

As the 21st Century unfolds Africa is confronted with two fundamental challenges: domestic and global. The domestic challenges include the promotion of sustainable development and the eradication of poverty; the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts; the promotion of peace, security and stability, without which the attainment of sustainable development would be impossible; the promotion of popular participation in the development processes, democracy and good governance.

The global challenges include the promotion of competitiveness in the global markets; the exigencies of the emerging information and knowledge based societies of the 21st Century; the continuous scientific and technological changes, and the incessant flows of new ideas, views, experiences, insights and opinions about almost everything that the human kind is involved in their attempts to grapple with the human predicament.

Access to the global “loop” of ideas, of the circulating new theories, methods and techniques, best practices and experience that would enable Africans to be at least aware of what was taking place in the world markets is perhaps the greatest challenge. Entrance into the “loop” will enhance Africa’s opportunities to acquire the competitiveness needed to be credible producers in those markets. Otherwise they would be marginalized and progressively eliminated as players of any consequence in the global political economy. But entrance to the “loop” would itself require certain capabilities, a combination of highly qualified human resources and technical productive capacity which is equally highly specialized and costly in terms of the initial costs and the opportunity costs, given African meager resources and the many competing alternative demands on them.

It is not clear, but worrying, whether information and communication technology ICT constitutes a fleeting window of opportunity for those countries who were not part of the first industrial societies, or it will be yet another great leap-frogging by the West and those with the capabilities to utilize its science and technology, thus leaving Africa and totally marginalizing its peoples from effective participation in the global economy and politics.

Narrowing knowledge gaps
Closing knowledge gaps will not be easy. Developing countries are pursuing a moving target, as the high-income industrial countries constantly push the knowledge frontier outward. Indeed, even greater than the knowledge gap is the capacity to create knowledge. Differences in some important measures of knowledge creation are far greater between rich and poor countries than the differences in income.


In order to respond to the two sets of challenges –domestic and global-- Africa must build the capabilities that would enable the people in the public and private sectors, policy makers and those actively engaged in the civil society and the various communities, to identify possible future challenges and opportunities; and to respond to them efficiently and effectively. To
build these capabilities would require the effective mobilization of the human resources and efficient organization of the material resources. And that would necessarily need the creation of an enabling environment for the release of individual--or collective--energies, talents, skills, enterprise, enthusiasm and experience for creative and productive purposes.

Promotion of human development will require the empowerment of the people by providing them with the necessary information, knowledge, education and training. It would also entail the establishment of various kinds of partnerships between government, the civil society and the private sector; between non-NGOs [non-govermental organizations] and CBOs [community-based organizations] and the government, between the people and the government and various other organization at both the national and international levels.

Sustainable human development is essentially human centered development. People—all the people—must be involved in the development processes. They must participate at all levels of the decision-making processes—-the conception, implementation and the monitoring of the development projects Only when the people are involved in the entire development process can development truly be of their choice. This can take place only in peace and freedom where people exercise their choice and commit their energies, talents, skills, capital and enterprise to the promotion of development and creative activities that are useful and meaningful to them or the community to which they belong.

People are Africa’s greatest assets. But for the people to be actively involved in the development process they need to be empowered. And this empowerment can take place only in an environment in which the people have the security and confidence, freedom and the opportunity, that they could apply their intellect, energies, talents, skills, knowledge and experience in the pursuit of various creative and productive activities of their choice. The challenge confronting the leaders in Africa is how to create and sustain the enabling environment that will facilitate the release of the energies, skills, talents and enterprise of the people, and promote various types of partnerships for the promotion of sustainable human development and the alleviation of poverty.

Our major resource is our people. We all recognize the inherent relationship between people and development. We are fully conscious of the fact that the primary objective of development is to improve the living conditions of our people. But we also know that it is the people who are the principal actors in the recovery and development process. It is obvious, therefore, that the success of the recovery and development process very much depends on the effective participation of the people in that process.

The main task confronting many national authorities is to create favorable conditions that would enable the people to fully apply their energy, skills and creativity for their own benefit and for the benefit of their countries. Those conditions should, first and foremost, aim at enhancing the people’s participation in the decision-making process in matters affecting their welfare. That situation will make them feel fully responsible for their development and hence motivate them to participate actively in the planning and implementation of their development activities.
President Ali Hassan Mwinyi, the United Republic of Tanzania, Opening Statement at the 

Good governance and democracy play major roles in the creation of the enabling environment of peace, security and stability. Good governance facilitates the release of the creative and productive forces of the people. It facilitates the mediation of conflicts, thus contributing to the prevention of violent conflicts. Democracy ensures equality and inclusiveness for people to participate in public affairs irrespective of race, colour, ethnicity, region or religion. It enables people to make “their choice” of “their rulers”. It ensures government by consent and not coercion, government of laws and not of men or women.

One of the greatest values—as well as strengths—of democracy is that it facilitates and encourages the expression of different points of views, ideas, opinions, principles, and alternative ways of doing things. In this way errors or inadequacies in policies can be identified and exposed before it is too late. It checks the occurrence of violent conflicts. Because it empowers the individual whose vote is critical in determining the fate of governments and politicians during elections, democracy prevents extreme poverty, other preventable social and economic disasters and abuses of power and authority.

The critical issue, however, is that although there are universally recognized principles of good governance and democracy, there are no universally acceptable and applicable models and practices of good governance and democracy.

**Democracy Revisited: The State of Democracy in Africa**

The creation of a democracy that is appropriate to African conditions is one of the challenges facing Africa in the 21st Century. It is because either democracy has not been working well, not clearly understood or somehow obstructed in its working appreciated that Africa has not been able to solve its serious economic and social problems. As e-Democracy is expected to transform and enhance the working of ‘traditional’ democracy, it would therefore be useful to briefly revisit democracy. Is democracy a foreign import from the West, or elsewhere? Or manufactured machinery that could be locally assembled by importing the essential parts? Or is democracy a set of ideas, norms and principles with universal appeal and application? Is democracy a means to an end or is it an end in itself?

There have been several definitions of democracy. However, a closer examination of various definitions reveal that democracy could mean both a theory of government or an idea of a particular kind of society. As a theory of government democracy stipulates the kind of conditions, or principles, under which the government can have legitimacy or the right to govern; as well as the conditions and the manner by which the citizens—or the governed—control and, if need be, remove or change the composition of the government.

As an idea of a particular kind of society, democracy means more than a description of conditions and principles. In this particular sense democracy entails a cluster of social and economic institutions supported by the relevant ideas, values, conventions and traditions. And it is in this latter sense that a lot of political and ideological debates have been conducted with regard to the meaning of democracy. Thus a system of governance might be judged to be
democratic not primarily on the criteria that rules exist which regulate the conditions under which the government can govern and the governed---the citizens---can control or remove that government, but on a number of other criteria which might not be directly related to the immediate tasks of governing. It is in this context that various manifestations of democracy, such as the Westminster [British] or American [federal, checks-and-balances] assume their particular meaning. They denote distinct manifestations of democracy, which are products of historical experiences and civilizational values of the peoples concerned.

**Types of Democracy**

In general three types of democracy can be discerned. These are: popular democracy, virtual [or vanguard] democracy, and representative democracy. Popular democracy is the purest of the three types but is not a practical possibility in modern mass societies. There are too many people. Virtual or vanguard democracy is plausible and intellectually appealing but it too is not practical given the dynamics of the political process. Again, too many people with diverse interests, needs, aspirations and wants. Moreover unscrupulous leaders who might assume the role of ‘philosopher-king’ or claim to have the right answers to all the questions could easily corrupt vanguard democracy. Representative democracy implies that those who comprise the decision-making body have been elected by the citizens and see themselves as representatives of those who elected them. This type of democracy is likely to be viable provided the citizens are able to express their preferences for alternative representatives by voting in regularly held free and fair elections.

However, in the final analysis all types of democracy could be reduced to the basic principle of effective participation. That what really distinguishes democracy from other forms of governance is the effective and meaningful participation of peoples in the decisions which affect their lives, livelihood and life-styles. In other words, rule by the people as opposed to rule by absolute monarchies, aristocracies or dictators. Those who rule should be accountable to the ruled. They should be obligated to justify their actions to the ruled and be removable by the ruled.

Thus underlying all types of democracy is the electoral principle: the choice of rulers or those who govern, or the representatives to act or decide on behalf of others, must be effectuated by elections. This is the only way by which people can somehow effectively participate in the decisions that affect their lives, livelihood and life-styles. In democracy people freely and openly elect their rulers, although the actual act of casting the vote is done in a secret ballot.

The electoral principle in democracy entails the following provisions: adherence to the rule of law, so that people can campaign and vote in freedom without fear or favour; freedom of association so that people can organize to articulate and promote their interests, or defend their rights; fair play, in that all those wishing to participate are subject to similar conditions and equal treatment; a free flow of information and access to publicly owned and controlled media and the press, so that the public is adequately informed with the public issues and policy options; a system of representation that will enable the articulation of a wide range of views and interests; and continuous adjustments of the constituency boundaries to reflect the fluctuating numbers of people living within them to ensure adequate and equitable representation.
1. Democracy is a universally recognized ideal as well as a goal, which is based on common values shared by peoples throughout the world community irrespective of cultural, political, social and economic differences. It is thus a basic right of citizenship to be exercised under conditions of freedom, equality, transparency and responsibility, with due respect for the plurality of views, and in the interest of the polity.

2. Democracy is both an ideal to be pursued and a mode of government to be applied according to modalities, which reflect the diversity of experiences, and cultural particularities without derogating from internationally recognized principles, norms and standards. It is thus a constantly perfected and always perfectible state or condition whose progress will depend upon a variety of political, social, economic and cultural factors.


What constitutes the economic, cultural and social conditions that are necessary to enable the people to effectively participate in the decision-making process might differ from country to country. And this to a large extent will depend on the peoples’ history, traditions and values. It is also possible that within one country more than one type of democracy could be practiced. A village or small town with very small population could sustain direct democracy while the country adopts the representative form of democracy.

Obviously a system of government that requires the effective participation of all, or at least the majority, of the people in the decision-making process is not likely to be a simple thing. In a world that is continuously changing the capacity to compete in the global market places is crucial to the survival and prosperity of modern economies and societies. Of necessity the rulers must be well informed about many things. And so must the citizens who elect the rulers.

**Strengths and Weaknesses of Democracy**

Obviously the survival and vitality of such a system of governance need continuous vigilance and the nurturing of the environment within which it can operate effectively and efficiently. It is therefore important to acknowledge that with all its undeniable virtues—a complexity and difficulty system of governance to operate and maintain. Moreover, democracy will not always deliver the morally upright and incorruptible leaders, or rulers with the requisite technical competence and experience. Democracy may not always reject the undesirable and bring in the desirable leaders or policies. But democracy will provide the people with the freedoms to organize themselves and the opportunities to express their views, judgments and preferences at the next elections. Faith in the democratic and electoral processes is therefore more important than the results of those processes.

It is this lack of faith in the democratic principles and electoral process among African incumbent and competing elites that constitutes one of the main obstacles to the effective workings of democracy in Africa. Most African leaders appear to be more interested with results of the processes and not the processes themselves. Both incumbent and competing elites are suspicious of the electoral process. They know the process can be manipulated to
bring about the desirable results. The incumbents are afraid that if the process is unfettered, that is free and fair elections, it will not produce the results of their liking. They may be voted out and thus lose their powers and privileges.

They also fear that once out of power they may lose their wealth and possibly their freedoms. The wealth may be subject to commissions of inquiries to establish their sources; and they may be committed to the courts of law to determine the guilt or otherwise of their past violations of human rights, criminal activities or infringements of the civil code. They do not trust their political opponents. They believe that the objectives of their opponents are not to promote good governance and prosperity for all the people, but primarily to accumulate wealth for themselves, just like the incumbents have been doing.

The competing elites do not trust the electoral process because they suspect foul play by the incumbents that elections could never be free and fair whatever contrary perceptions might be generated by the incumbents. They fear that the incumbents will do whatever necessary to keep the opposition out of power, harass or punish them whenever possible. There are thus mutual distrusts and suspicions between the ruling and competing elites. And in such circumstances it is difficult to see how the democratic and electoral processes could be allowed to function unencumbered, or perceived to be free and fair.

Not all contesting for political powers are motivated by the honour and responsibility of being chosen to lead their people to peace and prosperity. It is, rather, the opportunities to accumulate wealth and, wherever possible, repress and oppress those perceived to be competitors or enemies –be they individuals or ethnic groups. And because of the shrinking economies and widespread poverty with no immediate prospects for recovery the race to plunder and accumulate is very intense in most African countries.

Political parties in Africa have tended to be the means of acquiring and concentrating political power and not as institutions that articulated and promoted particular political mandates, or as watchdogs on accountability and transparency of the government. The culture of the one-party state is still very strong in many African countries. Intra-party democracy is rarely practiced. Policies are promulgated by the leaders and not based on research or grounded on debates by the members. Often political leaders regard the party as a personal instrument used to punish political enemies and reward friends. African leaders have been able to do this because of the weaknesses of the civil societies, ethnicity, poverty, ignorance, and disorganized and ineffectual opposition.

In Africa elections are rarely the occasions at which the accountability of governments [contesting political parties] are critical factors in the overall electoral processes. It is possible to have a ruling political party, reads government, elected and re-elected regardless of its track record of accountability or transparency. Elections are won without governments having to pay too much attention to what their citizens think of them. The priority is on getting the majority of counted votes and not in persuading or convincing the majority to vote. The majority of the people are poor, illiterate, ignorant of their basic constitutional rights and citizenship entitlements, are fearful of the authorities and are easily intimidated by them. Because of their poverty and the need to care for their families, the poor are compelled to choose between survival and civic responsibilities. They are easily bought, and corrupted.
With their numbers they have the potential power of the majority but because of their poverty and ignorance they lack the real power of the organized vote.

Democracy is predicated on agreed core values. These take time to manifest themselves and become generally acceptable. And these are rooted in the social foundations, ethical values, traditions and historical experiences of a people. Moreover, apart from the fact that it takes time for democracy to be acceptable as a system of governance, it also takes time for the decisions democratically arrived at to be translated into the intended results. In other words, unlike a dictatorship where directives can be issued and actions taken promptly, in a democracy decisions are products of prolonged deliberations and these take time to be delivered. Important as they are in the workings of a democracy, elections are primarily periodical events; they merely facilitate decisions on major national issues, broad policy options or choice of leaders for a given term. Promises made during elections, formulating the appropriate policies, converting them into a legislative programme, and ultimately into executive and administrative actions take a considerable amount of time. In Africa the transition between promises made and their delivery is fraught with problems and pitfalls. The practical working of democracy is itself a major problem that needs to be thoroughly understood. Apart from producing winners and losers, democratic elections may also produce leaders who are neither sincere nor have the capabilities to deliver on their promises.

Democracy is both a means and an end itself. The end is the existence of a society in which individuals are free and able to pursue their interests and vocations, utilizing their talents, intelligence, skills, entrepreneurship and experience, creative and productive capacities within the confines of the rule of law. Democracy is a means because it enables people to create and sustain that kind of society. Hence a dynamic functional relationship exists between the end and the means, analytically separate but interdependent and mutually supportive. These two analytical aspects of democracy --means and end --are in a continuous dialectical relationship, each one acting and reacting on the other. One cannot exist without the other.

Democracy is no longer a debatable option for Africa. It is a popularly demanded. People want the power to elect leaders of their own choice; and once these are elected to be able to hold them accountable in more effective and meaningful ways. People are also demanding competence, honesty, integrity, vision and commitment from their leaders to steer them from the endemic socio-economic and political problems towards the African Renaissance. Moreover people want to be sufficiently informed about public policy issues---transparency---so that they could debate the options, and make the right choices of leaders. They want leadership to be legitimately and honestly earned and not simply assumed, given or arbitrarily taken. This requires the creation of an enabling environment of peace, security and stability, and the continuous strengthening of the key institutions, mechanisms and processes supportive of good governance and democracy.

Though the task of governance and nation-building must be approached with care, time seems not to be on our side. Pressures are amounting both from within and from without for improved governance. Our people are becoming more and more aware of their rights in society and are accordingly demanding accountability and openness form governments. Globalisation has also stretched our inter-dependency relationship demanding in its wake the need to rationalise and harmonise efforts at governance and development.
The present scenario of radical global change must however be seen as an opportunity to interact and work in genuine partnership among ourselves and with the technologically advanced countries.

Prof. J.E. Atta Mills, the Vice President of Ghana, at the UNDP Governance Forum Two, Accra, June 26, 1998

Concluding Comments
Simply put, democracy is essentially about how people freely decide to live and work together in society. Thus the crucial issue facing Africa is not simply democracy, but what kind of democracy suitable to African conditions and the aspirations of its peoples. The principles of democracy are universal but their practical manifestations differ from one country to another. They are subject to various sociological and cultural realities, economic, historical and philosophical factors. Like other people in other parts of the world Africans, too, should formulate their particular manifestations of the universal democratic principles. This is an issue of ownership and relevance.

Is e-Democracy likely to enhance or improve the efficiency of ‘traditional’ democracy? What distinctive advantages does e-Democracy have over democracy as has been practiced in African countries? Is it likely to remove the obstacles to its effective and efficient workings, as those noted in the previous parts of the paper? Will e-Democracy bring about effectiveness in the mobilization of human resources and efficient management in response to the domestic and global challenges and opportunities? Will the adoption of e-Democracy facilitate the evolution of democratic institutions and processes that are relevant to the African conditions, traditions and cultural realities? Or is it likely to further entrench imported foreign democratic institutions and practices? These and other questions are addressed in the part of the paper.

3. WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE: TOWARDS E-DEMOCRACY

The theoretical possibilities for promoting e-Democracy in Africa exist. There are as well experiences in the practice of e-Democracy and e-Government world-wide that Africans could tape and learn from them. The revolutions in ICT and globalisation make it technologically feasible, accessible and arguably affordable. The emergence of a post-Independence African citizenry, better educated and well acquainted with the modern world---and the challenges and opportunities presented by globalisation---constitute the critical mass that might support the utilization of ICT in all sectors of society: business, government and civil society.

ICT offer new ways for providing access to information and knowledge and the potentials for widespread knowledge sharing that could have tremendous impact on the promotion of human development and the alleviation of poverty. It creates significant opportunities for learning, dissemination of vital information and accessibility to other people’s experience in governance and economic management. The spread of the Internet into Africa, the mushrooming of cyber cafes in African cities and major towns, personal computers and
mobile phones have created a ‘virtual’ global village, in which information or knowledge from most parts of the globe is accessible at the click of the mouse. And within the countries citizens are offered the possibilities of online registration and voting, of communicating with their representatives and articulating their grievances about service deliveries to the bureaucrats.

Concerned with Africa’s endemic dismal socio-economic and political conditions, disappointed with the workings of ‘traditional’ democracy, frustrated with the quality and service deliveries of the public sector, worried about the future of Africa in a rapidly globalizing world, and disenchanted with the prevailing political leadership in Africa, should the succeeding generation of African leaders welcome and promote the introduction of e-Democracy?

E-Democracy is a technology-based mechanism enabling people to effectively participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives, livelihood and lifestyles. While Africa is contemplating the adoption of e-Democracy there are many important questions that need to be posed and answered in the general interest of the people, and not simply those providing the technology or the few that have the competence and accessibility to benefit from it.

The critical questions revolve around conceptions, implementation, maintainance, affordability, and evaluation of the possible consequences of implementing e-Democracy on the structures and values of African societies, economy and politics. Will e-Democracy empower the ordinary people to effectively—and meaningfully—participate in the decisions that affect their lives, livelihood and life-styles? Will e-Democracy enhance the opportunities of the poor, the disabled and illiterate to be heard more clearly than before? Will it enhance their capabilities and opportunities to call to account those in positions of governance—politicians and bureaucrats? Will it make those in positions of governance more responsive, accountable and transparent? Or will e-Democracy strengthen the powers of the elites, the rich, educated and the corporate sectors at the expense of the ordinary people, and in particular the poor? Will it in fact further weaken what little influence the poor have over their ruler—as the human face-to-face relations are eliminated and the impersonal cyber interface takes place?

Will e-Democracy strengthen or weaken the African sense of community, cohesion and solidarity? Will it undermine the development of social capital so crucial to the prevention of violent conflicts, creation of the enabling environment of peace and stability conducive to the promotion of human development and the alleviation of poverty? Why e-Democracy for Africa now? Is it because traditional democracy has dismally failed, found inadequate or ineffective, or are there other reasons not necessarily related to African priorities?

While contemplating answers to these and other questions there are three crucial issues that need to be addressed. One, a better understanding of democracy, its principles and institutions; its positive/negative aspects, and its up-side and down-sides. Some of the serious obstacles to the efficient and peaceful working of democracy in Africa have been due to either inadequate understanding of democracy or refusal to accept the consequences of the democratic process. The process produces winners and losers, and each one of these has obligations and responsibilities in ensuring the functionality of the democratic process. There
are also principles that need to be upheld, honoured and respected. Is democracy now better understood by the majority of African peoples?

Two, a clear grasp of the reasons why democracy has not functioned in African countries as promised by the first generation of African leaders and expected by the people. We need to have a clear understanding of the circumstances---domestic and global---in which these leaders operated. Have they changed? And three, a clear understanding by the people of what is e-Democracy, how it works, and the reasons for its adoption in African countries. As it is supposed to help them participate more effectively in the decision process that affect their lives, livelihood and lifestyle, e-Democracy and its working should be adequately understood by the people.

Ideally the questions should be settled by popular consultations with the people. In the developed rich countries where e-Democracy has been adopted and e-Government is operational, for example in Canada, there have been consultations and public opinion surveys before the systems were implemented. People were made aware of the need for e-Democracy and the costs involved. In many instances the promotion of e-Democracy has been the consequences of both the demands of the people and the wishes of the governments. It has been part of the efforts of these governments to involve their citizens, making them aware of the exigencies of globalisation and the role of good governance and democracy so that they could work together in partnership in solving domestic problems and responding to the global challenges and opportunities.

To be effective and sustainable in the long term, the usefulness of e-Democracy must be explained to the people. Its objectives and costs need to be discussed and debated. Confronted with pressing domestic demands for the promotion of human development and the alleviation of poverty in the face of inadequate resources, the opportunity costs for the implementation of e-Democracy must be calculated, acknowledged and explained to the people. African countries are confronted with many competing priorities: roads, HIV/AIDS pandemics, hospitals and clinics, sewage, water, etc. As establishment of e-Democracy would require reliable supply of electricity, working and reliable telephone services bandwidth, servers, satellite, cables, etc—all very costly, and thus posing serious opportunity-cost evaluation and prioritization.

It is thus important that the benefits of e-Democracy to the overall efforts in the promotion of human development and alleviation of poverty be fully understood by the people. The distinctly unique role of e-Democracy—as opposed to ‘traditional’ democracy---in promoting the good society must be explained. Projecting the vision of the superiority of a society in which e-Democracy rather than ‘traditional’ democracy is the norm is clearly imperative, otherwise the people will regard e-Democracy as an expensive toy of the rich, educated and privileged. Or worse, to be perceived as an imposition from donors keen to support sales of technology from their countries. There must be a shared vision of the role of e-Democracy and commitment to its use.

E-Democracy is essentially about peoples’ empowerment, effective participation in the decision-making processes, enhancing and ensuring accountability and transparency of those in positions of governance, be they politicians or bureaucrats. There are two sides to
democracy. One constitutes the inputs into the decision-making process. This entails articulation of interests, views and opinions, suggestions and the airing of grievances. The other consists of checks and balances on government activities and behaviour of its leaders and bureaucrats. This entails critiquing of policy implementation and delivery of services.

All these evolve around the role of government, bureaucrats, political parties, politicians and political leaders. In virtually all countries of the world governments are held with suspicions. They are not fully trusted, rarely admired and reluctantly respected. Nonetheless governments are also universally regarded as very important institutions in the promotion, preservation and sustainability of the good society. The adoption of e-Government and e-Democracy in the industrialised rich countries is one important means of ensuring that governments do, in fact, play a very positive role in the promotion and preservation of the good society. That they do conform to the principles and norms of good governance, that they are efficient, supportive of the private sector, transparent and accountable to the electorate, and are generally ‘people-friendly’.

**Mutual Distrusts and Suspicions**

In Africa there is a very deep distrust between the government and the people. People do not trust the governments they participated in electing them. And governments are suspicious of the people who put them in positions of governance. There are mutual distrusts, suspicions and fear between the governments and the people. On the whole governments in Africa are not regarded as agents of positive change, but as instruments of command and control, power and prestige, as sources of personal wealth and leverage for the promotion of particular communities or classes.

Thus, in order to promote e-Democracy in Africa there is the need for the image of government to be demystified. That its purpose is to serve the people and not be served by the people. The dissemination of its role as essentially the agency of the people at the service of the people, to protect their lives and property, and promote the public good should be part of the consultative process. Those in key governance positions should be made aware of their responsibilities to those who put them in power, on the one hand; and on the other hand, to enlighten and empower the people so that they are aware of their rights---constitutional and political---to insist on accountability and transparency of those in key governance positions.

There is also the understandable fears of the politicians and bureaucrats of any changes. Promotion of e-Democracy will inevitably entail changes in the substance and style of politics, as well as in the manner in which government services are delivered. Thus both the politicians and bureaucrats are bound to be affected. And yet these are precisely the people who are critical in the advocacy, promotion and implementation of e-Democracy. Elimination or the mitigation of those fears are some of the obstacles---and challenges---in the promotion and implementation of e-Democracy. Hence the need for widespread consultation and public opinion surveys to eliminate the fears and suspicions before the implemention of e-Democracy.

The effectiveness of e-Democracy will largely depend on the capability and responsiveness of those in charge of the governance processes, incumbent politicians and bureaucrats. It is they who will be responsible to popularize the concept, to put in place the necessary technological infrastructure and human resources to ensure the operational viability of e-Democracy. As
already noted, in the present circumstances it is doubtful whether the incumbent politicians and bureaucrats would regard the adoption of e-Democracy to be in their interest. E-Democracy is bound to make great demands on the delivery of government services and the behaviour of the bureaucrats. As it is likely to enhance the opportunities of the people to effectively participate in the decision-making processes, e-Democracy is likely to compell politicians keen to be re-elected to be more responsive to the needs and aspirations of the electorate—the people. These responses are eventually likely to be converted into programmes and service deliveries by the government, thus impacting on the capabilities of the bureaucracies and the working habits of the bureaucrats.

Given the generally known inefficiency of African bureaucracies these demands are unlikely to be met, thus frustrating the objectives of e-Democracy. Hence bureaucratic reforms are an essential prerequisite to the implementation of e-Democracy. It could of course be argued that e-Democracy would in the long run promote bureaucratic efficiencies and make bureaucrats more ‘people-friendly’. But e-Democracy has to be already in place, and this is not likely before the reforms!

A government that is likely to be effective, as well as enhancing its legitimacy, in the 21st Century is one that has acquired the skills—and confidence—in disseminating information and knowledge, and in creating the environment for the people to acquire more information and knowledge in a continuous process of learning.

This is perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing African governments in the 21st Century. African governments are used to control, hide or manipulate information and knowledge. They regard what they gather from the public domain as government secrets, to be guarded and not released even to those from whom it had been obtained. The cult of secrecy and inaccessibility is pervasive in virtually all African governments. They keep their citizens in the dark. They misinform them; and in some instances feed them with deliberate lies. In this information and knowledge age people need to be informed of what is taking place in their societies and economies, as well as those in other parts of the world. There are some governments---South Africa included—that have instituted constitutional provisions entitling their citizens to have access to information pertaining to their dealings with the governments.

There is the need for mutual trust and respect between government and the people; in fact, a partnership based on mutual understanding of the citizens entitlements and civic responsibilities, on the one hand, and of the government’s obligations and responsibilities, on the other. Only in these circumstances can government and the people be better equipped to respond effectively to the domestic demands and global challenges. Do African governments as presently constituted have the capabilities to function effectively in the information age? Do incumbent African leaders have the competence—and the political will—to lead their people in the 21st Century economies and societies? These are some of the issues that must be addressed while contemplating the promotion of e-Democracy.

Globalization and ICT have transformed the structures and workings of the major economies in the world from capital and labour to knowledge and information. Wealth creation in the 21st Century is incrementally based primarily on knowledge and less on physical labour. And the driving force for this change is the development of modern electronic information technology, with its tremendous capabilities of creating, processing, storing and distributing
information and knowledge. This has raised the importance of education beyond that of a means to achieving a better or more enjoyable life to that of sustaining life itself.

A point for reflections: If the objectives of e-Government are to bring the government closer to the people, to create an amicable, informed and mutually beneficial partnership, to improve the capabilities of the government to deliver the required services in the manner desired by the people, is it then possible to have an operational e-Democracy in the absence of e-Government? These two appear to be mutually supportive. Africa has neither e-Government nor e-Democracy. What should be the Africa’s priority: e-Government or e-Democracy? Each is a costly innovation and demanding on human resources. This is the African dilemma.

**Other Problematics**

Globalization is a universal phenomenon, virtually unavoidable at once posing threats and fears, and providing opportunities and possibilities; and ICT is similarly available. yet the impact of the former is likely to differ from one society to another, and the accessibility to the latter is constrained by costs and the availability of the appropriate human resources. Those who are better equipped to deal with the technology offered by globalization and ICT are likely to benefit from it; and those who are not will not have the requisite capabilities to benefit from it. Africans belong to the latter category while South East Asians are in the former. Hence although globalization and ICT may provide Africans with the possibilities and opportunities for promoting e-Democracy, however, because of Africa’s dismally low technological absorptive capabilities, they may not be able to fully exploit such possibilities and opportunities.

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4. **IMPACT OF e-DEMOCRACY: POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES**

As with all innovations the impact of e-Democracy will create positive opportunities as well as negative consequences. The latter constitute inherent risks that need to be addressed and if possible counter-measures taken. The following are some of the possible consequences of e-Democracy.

Creatively conceived and appropriately structured e-Democracy can be a positive force in the mobilization and organization of resources for the promotion of human development and alleviation of poverty; and in the creation of the requisite capabilities to respond to the global challenges and opportunities. As it will enable citizens to be more informed, articulate and
active in public affairs, e-Democracy will transform politics, affect the conduct of the decision-making processes, the quality and the manner in which government services are delivered, and the behaviour of those responsible for policy formation and implementation: politicians and bureaucrats. It will enhance intra-party democracy, enabling ordinary members to communicate amongst themselves, thus promoting ownership of party policies and strengthening the accountability and transparency of the party leaders.

e-Democracy will expand the range of opportunities for citizens to contribute to the debates and discussions on public policies, checks and balances on governments’ activities and abuses of power and authority. Through their websites policy think-tanks or NGOs may inform the public on various issues and policy options. In short, e-Democracy will facilitate the circulation of information, opinions, views and experiences, thus expanding the political arena and empowering the citizen to effectively participate---at his/her own convenience and place---in decisions which affect his/her life, livelihood and lifestyles. It will make politicians and bureaucrats more responsive to the needs and aspiration of the citizens, accountable and transparent, accessible and ‘people-friendly’.

Dependent on the computer and the associated software, only those with the ability to buy the necessary hard and soft wares and are versed with ICT are likely to participate in e-Democracy. Given the level of poverty, illiteracy, deficient scientific culture and poor connectivity in African countries, the vast majority of the people will be excluded from e-Democracy. Yet the extension of e-Democracy to many more people---and not necessarily the majority---will be a very costly and risky proposition. Yet more, if no positive measures are taken e-Democracy is likely to consolidate and strengthen the role of the elites in the political processes, further marginalizing the poor and the illiterate. It may also facilitate the infiltration of business influence into domestic African politics. With vested interests in domestic policy options, the business community is likely to use its technological leverage to disproportionately influence the decision-making by entering into the e-Democracy loop, either directly or through proxies.

Given the costs of computers, telephone and connectivity, e-Democracy is likely to be dominated by the rich, educated and the well connected. These people will be able to communicate amongst themselves on a wide range of issues, strategize, and individually or in unison bring pressure to bear on the political system. Using his/her lap-top, he/she may able to articulate his/her views or opinions from the home, bedroom, the beach, golf club, or anywhere else in the world he/she might be on business trip or vacation.

In the old good early days of nation-building when the radio was the main means of communicating necessary information, required knowledge and official instructions a number of African governments heavily subsidized the manufacturing of cheap radios. They also created group listening posts/stations in various parts of the country, so that those who did not possess radios could use such facilities. Although these facilities were more useful to the governments, in that they were able to communicate their versions of news and official instructions they were nonetheless appreciated by the people. More importantly for our present purposes, the listening was done communally. The challenges for those promoting e-Democracy are to create a cost effective equivalent to the community radio posts/stations that are beneficial to both governments and the citizens.
The primary objective of e-Democracy is to transform traditional democracy into a more efficient and productive process in responding to the needs and aspirations of the people. But there is more to the democratic process than debating, discussing issues and casting the ballot. It is also a process of human inter-actions, empathy, sharing of human experiences, building social capital, consolidating the common interests and strengthening the community solidarity, identity and self-esteem. All these take place when diverse human beings physically interface with another in meetings, rallies, town-halls, discussion groups, etc. sharing their views and opinions, fears and anxieties, aspirations and visions, hopes and fantasies, shake hands and hug each other and in the process consolidate their uniqueness of being humans. Africans value the sense of community, of togetherness, and reaching consensus by actually talking to one another. Entirely dependent on impersonal technology and enhancing the ability of individuals to communicate with one another across the cyber space--and not in a community hall or group meetings--- e-Democracy is likely to inflate the role and importance of the individual at the expense of the community solidarity.

African Renaissance entails amongst other things the reassertion of the positive African traditions, norms and values. These are rarely found in the urban areas, nor among the educated and sophisticated Africans well versed with ICT, more concerned with global issues, personal professional mobility or mere survival in a rapidly globalized world. They are to be found in the rural communities. Obviously, the rural communities cannot be left untouched by modernity or escape the impacts of globalisation. There is thus the need for the promotion of a creative balance between what is best and essentially African and what is useful and beneficial from the outside world.

The crucial question: who is to promote that creative balance? Those literate and rich enough to possess a computer to be in the individualistic cyber loop of e-Democracy? And if so, what sort of African Renaissance is there likely to be? Will e-Democracy further deepen the integration of Africa into the evolving global community without Africans being able to play a significant role in that evolution, but merely as consumers and recipients of other people’s goods and services, cultures and civilizations?

5. CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES AND RISKS : CONCLUSIONS

ICT in general is not intended to replace the governance processes but to enhance them. Nor does e-Democracy intended to usher in a new type of democracy but to enhance the working of the ‘traditional’ democracy. By providing people with better ways of disseminating information and knowledge, facilitating communication amongst themselves, and between themselves and those in governance positions, e-Democracy is expected to strengthen and make democracy work more efficiently and effectively. E-Democracy thus offers great opportunities for the promotion of good governance and ensuring the effectiveness of democracy in Africa. But it also poses serious challenges and risks.

There is no universal best practice or method for the implementation and working of e-Democracy. Conditions in each country are bound to differ: different levels of economic development, levels of technological capabilities, cultures and traditions, literacy/illiteracy, wealth inequalities, political and civic leadership, etc. What is common to all the countries
that have adopted e-Democracy or e-Government is consultation and public opinion surveys to determine the thinking and wishes of the people. This constitute one of the biggest challenges for any African country that wishes to adopt e-Democracy. It will have to consult the people, conduct dialogues and discussions with various political parties, NGOs and CBOs, as well as the private sector.

In light of the enormous economic and social problems confronting Africa—the domestic challenges noted in Part One of the paper—it would be prudent to facilitate the evolution of e-Democracy and not engineer its imposition. As the other priorities—for example, health, roads, schools, etc.—are effectively addressed, so would the conditions for devising an even better method of mobilizing and managing the scarce resource emerge. The need for e-Democracy might then appear to be a popular demand. But governments should be a few steps ahead, preparing, educating and consulting the key constituencies and players, building partnership and creating the enabling environment. This is another challenge for African governments. African governments are not used to forging partnerships or consulting their citizens.

Exclusively dependent on high technology and with the cyber space as its working environment, the viability and continued performance of e-Democracy in Africa is likely to be dependent on those who own and control the ICT industry. There is, as well, the likelihood of it being infiltrated by foreign business or groups with their own interests or agendas, using e-Democracy to influence the outcome of certain decision-making processes. Or they may attempt to manipulate public opinion in their favour on specific business issues. These are some of the risks that have to be addressed.

**Political Parties**

Diversity of opinions, views, ideas, policy options and competing leaderships are vital to democracy. Unorganized these views, opinions and ideas are ineffective in bringing about the necessary or desired changes in society. They have to be aggregated in an orderly manner for them to be operational and effective, and thus meaningful to the people. In ‘traditional’ democracy political parties mobilize and aggregate public opinion. In the process they make numerous promises to the public that once elected into power they would implement them. A political party thus creates the basic foundations for political accountability and transparency for their members as well as the general public.

More importantly, appropriately structured and managed political parties constitute vital building blocks in the stability of a political system. They provide the channels and discipline for various political articulation, and in the process reduce the number of political groups that might otherwise have emerged. Although on the one hand e-Democracy might help the political party in many of its functions, but it might also encourage fragmentation and decay as individual members or special interests within the party can now directly communicate with one another or those in key governance positions.

**Domestic Demand-Driven Option…or External Supply-Driven Current Fashion**

The technological capabilities for the adoption of e-Democracy exist. They are accessible. E-Democracy and E-Government are operational in many advanced rich countries. But these are countries that are not only rich and highly industrialized, they also have had a long experience in democracy and good governance. In virtually all these countries the need to adopt e-
Democracy was recognized and acknowledged by all sectors of society: government, private and civil society. The need was both demand and supply driven.

The ‘electronic’ is merely the means and not the substance of democracy. In these countries democracy was working but it was perceived to be deficient, and the electronic device was intended to facilitate and enhance the efficient workings of democracy. For these countries the electronic capabilities are available, accessible and affordable to virtually all the people. Is this the case in Africa? Have the obstacles to the efficient workings of democracy in African countries been clearly and objectively identified? Has democracy been allowed to work in Africa? Has it been a casualty of the Cold War and the connivance of the first generation of African leaders? Are there no other means—affordable and meaningful to the people—of making democracy work more efficiently? Is e-Democracy affordable domestic-demand-driven option, or is it simply an external-supply-driven current fashion?

E-Democracy is theoretically available and accessible. In the present circumstances beset with numerous opportunity-costs it is however arguable if e-Democracy is affordable. It is nonetheless desirable, as it has the potentials of enhancing the efficient workings of democracy. Moreover there is a historical convergence of propitious factors. There is the availability of technological capabilities. There is the willingness—at least at the rhetorical level—of the rich industrialised countries [G7] to assist African countries in the narrowing of the ‘digital gap’. There is also the new generation of African leadership committed to the development of Africa and responding positively to the global challenges and opportunities, and is prepared to enter into partnership with the rest of the world in pursuit of those objectives—as stated in NEPAD.

**The Challenge**
Consultatively conceived and creatively presented, appropriately structured and generally accessible and affordable to the people, its objectives well understood by the illiterate and the poor, e-Democracy can play a very positive role in the enhancement of accountability and transparency of those in positions of governance and service delivery, and in the mobilization and management of human and material resources for the promotion of human development and the alleviation of poverty.
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