Democracy and Development are Inseparable
Contradictions in the Recent
Democratic Process in Africa

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I. Introduction

The last decade of the 20th Century will be remembered by us all as one in which there were tremendous gains for democratic forces across the world and especially Africa. One party dictatorships, long term military regimes, one-party dominant states, personal rule and all forms of unaccountable authoritarian and totalitarian governments were put on the defensive as people forced open some space for Civil engagement and a broadening of the democratic space.

This has been due to a combination of factors both internal and external. On the external front, the collapse of the Eastern bloc state capitalist (wrongly called socialist) system in the late 80s freed the world from the superpower rivalries between the West (led by the U.S.A) and the East (led by the U.S.S.R). Democracy was the greatest casualty of that competition because both powers were content to have suppine, compliant regimes in the Third World. The demand for democracy by Third World peoples was suppressed by whim from Washington, London or Paris or Moscow, Berlin or Bucharest as every issue was fed into the tainted glasses of ideological “ours” and “theirs” regardless of the wishes of the people. Internally the pressure for change has been there but with different levels of intensity and also different outcomes. While it is not true that the lever for the pressures for democratic change was just the collapse of the Eastern bloc, it is correct to state that that collapse has helped enhance the process.

Another factor one has to put into consideration, consequent to the end of the cold war is the new globalization. The revolution in information technology in the past few years has created more awareness about the conditions of other peoples around the World. Human rights issues, humanitarian crises and socio-political struggles in one part of the world are easily transmitted to other parts of the world. No longer are dictators, mass murderers and genocidaire regimes able to hide their crimes behind distance and ignorance.

For many African countries, International financial institutions and Western governments such as the World Bank/IMF that hitherto never bothered themselves about democracy, human rights, good governance, etc have become loud in demanding these from recipient countries. They are now part of the many conditionalities of aid, loan or grants. This convergence has made many cynics and critics to ask if at all these institutions are serious about democracy. How can the same people who created, nurtured and sustained Mobutu, Bokassa, Idi Amin and other dictators now suddenly be demanding democracy in the same countries? Not very long ago the regime of President Daniel Arap Moi / KANU in Kenya was being sold to Africans as ‘responsible’ ‘moderate’ government, a symbol of the peace and prosperity that the rest of Africa must emulate. But by the later 80s and early 1990s under pressure from internal local/national forces the one party state had to give in to demands for more space. Somehow and most incongruously, sitting behind some of these anti-KANU forces were Western diplomats who previously turned blind eyes to the excesses and gross violations of individual and group rights perpetrated by the same Moi. Similar volt face and brazen opportunism can be seen in many other countries. Today former President Nelson Mandela, is revered across the world. Most leaders would want to be seen with him. He commands special sessions of parliaments, UN, but the struggle for the democratic rights of South Africans was not always popular especially in the West. In a memorable sentence after the commonwealth Summit in 1987 in the Bahamas, British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, described the ANC, Mr. Mandela’s liberation Movement, as a “typical terrorist
organization”. Less than five years later Mandela was out of prison and she could not wait to be photographed with this leader of terrorists!

These inconsistencies notwithstanding, there can be no debate about Africa needing democracy. What kind of democracy, however, is a debatable issue because of the different interests, socio-political forces and historical context of different countries.

2. **What is Democracy?**

While we may not agree on one uniform definition there are certain universal attributes of a democratic society namely:

- Equality of all citizens before the law without regard for race, ethnicity, religion, region, gender, or any other social or biological differences;
- The supremacy of the rule of law;
- Full participation of people in how they are governed;
- The principle of separation of powers between the executive, legislature and judiciary;
- Freedom of expression, association, conscience and affiliated family of rights;
- Periodic elections as a means of choosing alternative ideas for public policy.

Any society that claims to be democratic must have all of these elements. Those that aspire to build a democratic society must have most of these elementary things in place or be taking genuine steps towards their achievement.

3. **The New Democracies in Africa**

There has been an upsurge in the number of African states that have gone from totalitarian regimes to fully elected governments. Indeed for the first time since its formation the last British Common Wealth Summit in South Africa (1999) was attended exclusively by states with elected governments. The only state without an elected government was Pakistan which was not allowed to participate.

So unpopular are military regimes these days that even the OAU, that most powerful of all trade unions in Africa (because it used to be a trade Union of Generals) at its 1999 Algiers Summit unanimously agreed to ban military rulers from future summits.

Does the fact that a government was elected mean that it is democratic? This question is being asked in view of our recent experience where elections have been used to justify or legitimize the same old rulers and ruling elite. For instance in Kenya despite the fact that the majority of the electorate voted against KANU and President Moi, both remain in office. In some countries like Burkina-Faso, Ghana, Uganda, elections were used to civilianise military regimes that came through traditional coups or armed struggle.

There are numerous complaints about the electoral processes that raise questions as to the credibility and integrity of the electoral systems. Attention is now shifting away from mere holding of elections, albeit an important event, to the whole process, the structure and the playing fields as a whole. Traditional concerns of Western liberal democratic culture that insist on having more than one political party, competitive politics are also being questioned in certain countries such as Uganda.
All these issues show us that democracy is not a one way road. Even in so-called advanced liberal-democratic states the structures and forms are different. Apart from questions of structure and process some of the emerging issues in the last few years concern the purpose of democracy. In the context of mass poverty faced by the majority of African people, collapsing/collapsed standards of living, of what benefit is the right to put an X or Y in a box every four or five years if they do not make any difference to your life? It is also true that in many of these newly democratizing states it is easier for the rich to get themselves elected, organize political parties and fund candidates. In many cases as a critic of the processes had observed, people “are voting without choosing”. They get the chance to vote for the elite or groups of elite who will oppress them and for many years in a row. It is nonsense to have many political parties when all the political parties represent the same elite interests.

Questions are being raised about the relationship between individual and social development and democracy. Is democracy sustainable without development? Is development sustainable without democracy?

4.  Democracy and Development

Linking democracy to Development exposes certain contradictions between the pro-democracy forces in Africa and sponsors of democracy and human rights internationally.

The Western countries and Donor agencies defend our right to life, freedom from torture and abuse of our human rights, however, when we ask for the means of sustaining our lives (jobs, adequate salaries, etc) and also a right to socio-economic progress to make our democratic freedoms sustainable, we do not elicit the same enthusiasm and support.

As long as you have had elections that have been adjudged by Jimmy Carter and other electoral busy bodies, to be “free and fair” “relatively free and fair” or one in which “irregularities do not appear to have significantly affected the outcome” you are O.K., business can go on as usual. Trade, contracts, loans, aid, etc can start flowing again.

What about development? That is politics and the self-given mandate of human rights groups do not extend to that field! In this they are prisoners of the cold war context in which they emerged mostly as a reaction to Eastern Europe. Those states were initially not vulnerable on socio-economic issues because of the expansive state welfare but on civil and political rights there were plenty of points to be scored by the west. More than a decade after the collapse of Eastern Europe human rights discourse in the west still remains in that ideological blind alley. And that is why some Third World countries are in revolt against dominant international human rights NGOs with their obsession for individual rights.

It exposes the tension between the rights that are called first generation rights (i.e. civil and political rights) and the secondary and tertiary generation of rights (i.e. socio-economic and cultural rights and the right to Development).

It is on these latter rights that the limited democratic space that has opened up in Africa in the last few years has failed woefully. The threat to democracy in Africa lies in the failure to wake up to the challenges of development.
In the past, especially the post independence period it used to be fashionable to argue that Africa was not ready for full-blown Western democracy. It needs to develop first and after that democracy will follow. We postponed democracy yet the experience in most countries is that of lack of development. It seems that we are repeating the same mistakes the other way round. That is postponing development while trying to maintain some form of democratic arrangement. It is an experiment that is doomed to failure because it is not an either/or situation but two sides of the same coin.

5. **Contradictions of Democracy and Development**

The processes of democracy and development are necessarily conflictual in a number of ways. One, there are winners and losers. The ideal situation is for all of us to be winners but the reality is that that is not the case. But we could work towards a situation where “winners do not take all” and losers do not become so marginalized that they have no stake in either the democratic order or development as a whole. Majority of the people must be real winners and they must guarantee full protection for the minorities.

Two, some of the economic policies actively pursued by our various governments under pressure from the West /IMF/WB are wrecking lives and destroying social and welfare services. Yet these polices are often not subjected to election, referendum or debate. What kind of democracy/development are we promoting that gives me the right to choose leaders but denies me the right to participation in the economic policies of the country?

Three, the formalistic conception of democracy as majority rule in situations where this majority is assumed in ethnic, religions or regional terms runs the risk of making a significant section of the population permanent minorities and assuring the majority leadership in perpetuity.

This is why some people will argue that the introduction or imposition of multiparty democracy has escalated ethnic, religious or other sectarian conflicts on the Continent. On the surface it may seem so but if one looks deeper behind these conflicts they are actually the consequence of long - term denial of basic democratic rights by the political elites. In a Society where the rule of law is adhered to and leaders are accountable to their peoples victimization, discrimination and abuse of the rights of citizens as individuals, class or groups will not be tolerated; and where or when they occur there should be institutional mechanisms to deal with them.

In places like Rwanda and Burundi, it is difficult to see how a crude majority rule can bring democracy or resolve the genocidaire culture in both countries. Majority/minority rule has historically produced genocide because of the criminal nature of the state. Before talking of democracy one has to look at the enabling institutions, decriminalize the state, de-ethnicise power and normalize relations between the state and the people.

Four, attention must now shift away from just elections to the whole socio-economic and political infrastructure necessary to sustain democracy and development such as constitutional arrangements, functioning legislatures, judiciary, the security forces, political parties, the media, vibrant civil society, structures of governance, relationship between different levels of government, etc.
Many of our states are too centralized yet institutions are too weak thereby concentrating excessive powers around the President, Prime Minister or governors.

Finally it is important for us to see democracy and development as processes needing constant review, adjustments, adaptability and creativity.

6. The Way Forward

Africans need to exercise intellectual and political autonomy over our own development. The current donor-driven agenda will not lead to sustainable development. Democracy and development are not projects with a set time frame, life span, evaluation schedules - all those fashionable benchmarks that our NGOs are used to in dealing with their funders, most of the time foreigners.

There is no doubt that Africa needs help but that help must be decided by us within our own context and priority. Help does not always mean foreigners. There is enough human and material resources on this continent to reverse the current stagnation of our societies. It requires a de-colonization of our psyche and having faith in ourselves and our peoples.

I do not even accept that our problems are due to a lack of capacity thereby needing “capacity building” funded by UN, E.U, DANIDA, Oxfam, etc. The problems are not also due to lack of resources or mobilization capacity.

Take for example the tragic war in the DRC that has drawn five countries militarily. All of these countries except one, Namibia, are classified in the UNDP human development report as least developed countries. When we talk of building schools, roads, or hospitals these governments will be running to Donors, Western countries and banks, the IMF/WB but when it comes to war no African country asks for world Bank/IMF clearance. They do not look for Donor funds. Somehow they are able to mobilize huge armies, logistical support and enormous material and non-material resources to fight these wars.

Therefore the problem cannot be a lack of capacity or absence of resources rather it is what we use our capacities for and how we set our priorities. We need to transform our capacity for war into one for peace. There must be better employment opportunities for our Youth than being sent into wars whose objectives both moral and political are often neither clear nor just. Any country that sends its citizens to senseless wars cannot claim to be democratic because if indeed it is, the people must have a final say in deciding which wars they fight. Even if the war is popular, is the responsibility of a leader only to lead people to war? Why not to peace and development? For instance both sides in the tragic war between Ethiopia and Eritrea claim the support of their peoples. Is it not criminal that more people have been killed in two years than in all the several years of the just war against the Mengistu regime?

Also we have to look at the issue of colonial borders in Africa. The 1960s’ dubious consensus to “leave things as they were” even though it was pragmatic politically it has not really worked. The arbitrariness of the borders has not and cannot make us stay out of each other's backyards. In practice it has served as a tool in the hands of dictators whose motto was “Leave my prisoners to me and I leave yours to you to do as you please”. Consequently sovereignty, territorial integrity of the African State is only claimed at the level of abusing the rights of its citizens. This perverse statehood has to be replaced by a genuine Pan Africanist collective sovereignty, security and integration. The global trend now is for countries to seek
relevance in larger political and economic units. That is why the Europeans who divided us into Anglophone, Lusophone, francophone and all the other phony phones are now united in one common Europe.

Democracy and Development is not sustainable in one country alone. There must be a convergence between African states so that we can broaden the democratic space and also improve our development chances. There are positive shifts at both state and non-state level. There is more talk of regional cooperation. There is renewed interest in regional institutions but the insistence on not relaxing the attachment to colonial borders is limiting any prospect for genuine integration and development.

We cannot just talk of freedom of goods and services while at the same time criminalizing Africans or imprisoning them behind these borders. People must be free to live, settle and work across the borders. It is an outrage for Africans to have more problems entering an African country than they do going to Europe or America. As if adding insult to injury generally holders of European/American passports do not even need visa to enter our countries. Where they do they get them with ease.

The issue of Pan Africanism will not go away but rather it will be central to the renewal and regeneration of Africa in the 21st century. Domination in the 21st century is going to be fully based on knowledge. Therefore we need to equip ourselves and our institutions with the power that comes from new information technology. It offers tremendous opportunities for us to jump some of the barbaric stages in Europe’s development. It is also a great opportunity for us to contribute new morality to this new technology.