

# A Review of Democracy and Development in Africa

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The African continent and many developing countries have for the past two decades been involved in the democratisation processes, as democracy is gradually being accepted as the political ideology that can better inform internal and external socio-political and economic relations as a vector for state development. Despite the existing political will in most African states, a fundamental element for democratisation, most countries in Africa lack the necessary tools for democracy and development. Undeveloped human resources, rural infrastructure, and political institutions are some of the illustrative examples that hinder democracy and development processes.

The combination of these factors and others are subject of debate among policy makers, academics and researchers. In the pursuit of this debate, the view about the democratisation and development processes of the African continent is polarised. In this polarisation are those optimistic about the future and those whose view about Africa is, increasingly, negative – the afro-pessimists. This debate, however, puts the actors in a quandary to give priority to democracy or development, which are on their own, the necessary and encompassing elements for the process. As Manyasa (2008: 39) pointed out, “democracy, [like development...] generated controversy in equal measure as more people and society on the continent interrogate the concept.” Thus, despite the challenges of different geneses, there is hope for a better African State than what the opponents of this view would posit.

This optimistic approach about democracy and development in Africa, to some extent, contradicts what many researchers, academics, students and policy-makers have written, read or learned about the continent because this view is not sustained by historical evidence widely published about Africa. However, practical evidence of democracy and development in Africa is irreversibly present in the continent despite some historic records. Perhaps contradictions to what the real issues of the continent are emanate from the fact that many opinions are vented from outsiders who have no clear understanding of the continent. It should be said, however, that the western contribution in the democratisation and development process are significant. As Yohannes (2011: 128-129) would argue, for the evolution, consolidation and sustainability of the processes, African people need to be more involved in the molding process of the future of their continent in the same manner in which they were successfully on the vanguard against colonialism, apartheid and racism.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the beginning of the Third Millennium created in Africa a powerful wave of optimism about the future of the continent. It was widely believed that the end of the Cold War between the west and the east would liberate a vast amount of financial and human

resources that would be directed to fight and solve global problems, in particular, those affecting Africa. As such, this new era widened the optimism about institutional and economic and interstate development and cooperation respectively, to which periodic free and fair elections, new infrastructure (especially roads, railways, power grids, telecommunication and water sources) would lean on. There is no doubt that this new political and economic era has been perceived to be the vector of development on which access to education, health, justice and equal opportunities for all will be made possible.

It should be noted that the optimism raised about the future of the African continent was informed, among others, by the following illustrative facts:

- The end of the Cold War was widely perceived as the beginning of an era of peace and harmony among the nations of the world in which conflict or threat of conflict, as well as the ideological divide, would be replaced by a common desire of working together in searching for the solutions of the problems affecting millions of human beings in the world, particularly in Africa, in a more cooperative international atmosphere;
- It was understood that the Cold War was fed by vast amounts of human, financial and technological resources. With the highly symbolic fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the new century, these resources would be liberated from their previous use and were supposed to be directed to address more noble causes of mankind.

As a result, the role played by national, regional and supra-national organisations had to be revisited and transformed to fit into the new political, social and economic realities. It was not surprising that in Africa, at the country level, this led to the adoption of long-term development plans such as the well-known 2020 or 2025 agendas. At the continental level, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was transformed into the African Union (AU), the latter tasked with more economic and social development responsibilities than the first. The regional economic organisations such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and others, effected changes on their internal structures as well with the intent of being more suitable to respond to new regional, continental and global economic and political challenges.

As it could be expected, the international community shifted its focus from an arms race to engage in issues of global common interest where the environmental and human rights questions became some of the main discourses.

All these analyses and debates at national, regional and international levels created, among other things, a largely shared view that poverty and backwardness were not an irreversible fatality for Africa. Indeed, the continent is endowed with vast natural resources of soil and subsoil, but these needed to be explored and used as to better feed and sustain higher living standards of its



peoples, with a particular focus on the necessity to eradicate (and not merely alleviate) poverty.

During that period of critical analyses about the past and planning the future of our countries, it was acknowledged that for Africa to achieve its ambitious but necessary goals, all countries needed to reform their governance systems, as to widen the democratic space for the political, economic and social participation of all the citizens in the life of their nations. Thus democratic governance and development became two faces of the same coin. Manyasa (2008: 28) has referred to democracy and development as “twin issues that have generated much debate, not just in the developing world, but throughout the whole world.” In this understanding, no-one can say which face comes first or which face is more important than the other. Both are expected to go side by side, mutually reinforcing each other in a synergic manner.

Twenty years on, looking at the point of departure and the results achieved thus far, we clearly see, without binoculars, that democracy and development are both happening across the continent and we should be encouraged by this trend.

However, it should be understood that the new political and economic era transformed inter-state relations previously led by an isolationist approach to a more interactive and dynamic one. This interaction undoubtedly meant that States are placed into the global arena and that their economic, social and political developmental goals are no longer a priority of a single state alone, but of the entire regional, continental and global community. It should be acknowledged also that not all the goals of the new era were achieved, both at the national and international levels.

For example, a few years after the end of the Cold War, the expected ‘peace dividends’ were diverted to fight international terrorism, in the aftermath of the ‘September 11’ events. Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the necessity to upgrade and strengthen security systems, have demanded vast human, financial and technological resources from all countries concerned. The net result of this is that the resources that Africa was expecting to be made available by the international community to help speed up the process of its development simply are not there.

Global economic crises are some of the unexpected factors that have negatively impacted on the development projections in Africa. The contractions of foreign direct investment on the continent, job losses and increasing unemployment due to global financial crises, are some of the factors slowing the processes developed for poverty eradication in Africa (see Balchin, 2009).

It should be remembered that stringent measures as an “attempt to alter the nature, structure and functioning of economies” (Melville, 2002) were imposed on many developing countries, in general and on Africa in particular. These measures became known as structural adjustments. The Structural Adjustment programme in Africa was implemented at a heavy economic and social cost. The gap between have and the have-nots widened, investment in basic infrastructures were heavily reduced, resulting in a decline of productivity and exports (see Melville, 2002). Given the

African experience on issues of economic restrictions or austerities, we cannot help but harbor sentiments of sympathy and solidarity with Western countries forced into a similar path.

In this globalised world, there is no doubt that institutions and agencies that are placed to intervene and influence the pace of international development are also affected by the financial crises. Thus, the African continent is not immune to the global crises and the impact of them, even after the 'salvage mission' – they will be felt for many years to come.

In spite of this environment of economic pessimism created by resources that failed to materialise as expected and unfolding financial and economic crisis and uncertainty, African peoples continue to believe that the development of their countries is possible, inspired by the positive experiences of other countries that are fast developing, such as Brazil, India, Vietnam, among others. They are busy developing and strengthening, enabling a political, economic, legal and institutional environment for their own citizens to invest in many available business opportunities.

It is in this framework of the struggle for development and shaping of a better future that in most African countries democratic pluralism is encouraged by vibrant media, a participative civil society and political parties. We see national parliaments being more and more assertive in their role of overseeing government performance, creating a healthy tension that pushes governments to live up their electoral promises. Thus the perception of African parliaments as mere rubber stamp institutions is gradually changing.

Still on the political front, presidential, legislative and local elections are common events in most African countries nowadays. As the Chairman of the Africa Forum for former heads of states and government and other former African leaders of important international institutions with democratic credentials, I can say that at the creation of this forum in 2006, only seventeen leaders constituted its membership. After five years, its membership comprises thirty-seven leaders.

It can be construed therefore, that as a result of democratic elections, adherence to the rule of law, and mostly rigorous observation of the national constitutions and electoral conducts, more heads of states and governments in Africa are reluctant to cling to power as the risk of leaving the government when their term expires or lose an election. It is encouraging to know that there are countries in Africa that have more than one former head of state, a fact that can be taken as historical evidence for political development taking place in African countries.

The Mo Ibrahim Prize, which is bestowed on former heads of states and government in Africa who were democratically elected, remained within the parameters of the constitutions, and ruled their countries with excellence while promoting security and rule of law, participation and human rights, sustainable economic development and human development, is a recognition of the evolution of democratic and development processes in Africa. Given the fact that these and other developments started taking shape in the last two decades, one can argue that the continent has a robust future ahead. As Annan



(2011: 32) pointed out “the progress made across the continent in the last few years gives hope for the future.” Although Annan’s argument refers specifically to the investment in small farmers, noticeable economic and socio-political progress is patent in the continent.

The Nobel Peace Prize is another award that some of the sons of the continent have won. Leaders like Nelson Mandela, the first black president of South Africa, Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, Kofi Annan, the former Secretary General of the United Nations and Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first female president in Liberia and in Africa, are some of the winners of this prize in recognition of their effort towards peace and development. I believe, therefore, that both awards (the Mo Ibrahim and the Nobel Peace Prize) are important pointers to take into account in our discussions on democracy, development and Africa’s future. Thus, the reference to these facts is encouraging as one can see the exponential rate of democratisation and development in Africa.

The former Ghanaian president, John Kofi Agyekum Kufuor, who in 2008 received the Chatham House Prize for his most significant contribution to the improvement of international relations, was named in 2011 a Global Ambassador Against Hunger for the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) to advocate on behalf of the world’s poorest and hungriest people. The effort pursued by Kufuor was acknowledged also in 2011 by the World Food Prize Foundation when alongside the former Brazil president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, he was awarded the World Food Prize.

When President Kufuor was in office, he led his country through his vision, which among other important issues, focused on five priority areas which included 1) The pursuit of good governance, 2) Modernisation of agriculture for rural development, 3) Private sector participation, 4) Enhanced social services and 5) Vigorous infrastructure development. In his government plan, he made a significant contribution to democracy, development and to building the future of Africa, especially when he promoted the children’s health and education by providing them with free meals and education.

Despite the positive development of democracy taking place in Africa, there are also many difficulties and challenges to overcome. In my view, the single biggest challenge Africa is faced with to strengthen democratic values and practices, is the weakness of its institutional framework.

The majority of African constitutions are considered by experts to be conformed to international standards. They address the various topics such as fundamental rights and guarantees, the balance of power among institutions, checks and balances, environmental issues, among others, in a competent manner. A similar positive appreciation is made about government policies and the fairness of many ordinary laws.

The challenge is the capacity of public institutions to fully implement or comply with such regulations, particularly those associated with the fundamental rights of the citizens. Although there is a lot of progress to be recorded, in general, the African public institutions still have a long way to go in playing their role fully in guaranteeing a fair relationship between the state and its citizens.

In this regard, continued efforts in training and educating civil servants should be pursued in all African countries, so that, at all levels, they acquire a culture of serving citizens with the necessary technical competence and ethics. Investment in equipment and new technologies are also required so as to make public services more efficient and responsive to the expectations of the citizens.

Besides progress in the process of democratisation, on the economic front, I feel very encouraged to see many African entrepreneurs running their own businesses in their home countries or other African countries. Some of these businesses are large, requiring high levels of investment and managerial skills. This is a new development in the continent; it is happening because national governments are creating enabling environments for businesses to flourish, but also for Africans themselves to feel secure about investing in Africa.

In their pursuance of national development, African countries are making an effort to attract investment from everywhere, including the emerging economies of Asia, Americas and Europe. Some countries of the north are not happy with diversification of the origin of investment on the grounds that such investments, particularly from China, bring with them inherent dangers for the development of democracy in Africa and the rule of law.

I think it is important to treat investment as investment and politics as politics. Virtually all countries of the north do business with China, from trade to manufacturing and other services – they don't see much harm in that. They also have Chinese investments in their territories and view this as just conducting business and not politics; they accept this as normal.

It is true that the countries of the north engage China in political dialogue, with a focus on issues of their concern, including human rights, but they do that at appropriate fora. It is equally true that some Chinese companies may violate labour laws, but similar violations are perpetrated by companies from elsewhere, including countries of the north. Investments must respect national laws and this principle should apply to all.

All in all, domestic and foreign investments are bringing economic growth across the continent. What statistics show is just part of the reality. Indeed, there are many business initiatives taking place in Africa (some would even say the vast majority) that are not captured in any official statistic. In spite of their lack of any formal status, they nevertheless do exist, produce and sell goods and services. In many cases, formal businesses start in the informal sector and only upgrade themselves at a later stage into the formal sector. All these businesses are creating prosperity and are contributing to the upliftment of many.

Africa today is quite different from the Africa of the past; Africa has joined the race of development. Many African countries are registering unprecedented economic and human development. The Mo Ibrahim Index (2011) shows that 39 out of the 54 African countries continue to register economic growth and 50 maintain human development. The pace may differ from country to



country but no-one can ignore this. However, African economic growth must go hand in hand with its political development. The Index shows us what problems need urgent attention from governments and civil society. There is stagnation or decline of the indicators in the categories of security and rule of law and participation and human rights. This imbalance of performance in the four categories is possibly the cause of the violent upsurge we are witnessing nowadays in northern Africa and in Cote D'Ivoire and Madagascar for example. However, I believe that the African leaders, both, from governments and civil society are getting more and more aware of this necessity of balance. I hope that the participation of the citizens in the process of shaping the future of their countries continues.

The development of the *African Journal of Governance and Development* by the University of St. Thomas of Mozambique can be viewed as an effort by Mozambican scholars and those associated with this initiative to contribute and participate in the democratisation and development process of the continent. The articles in this journal will serve as a source of learning and inspiration to many, especially those wishing to widen their insight about the issue of governance and development from academic and African perspectives. This scientific journal will anchor knowledge shared by scientists across the globe who will contribute to the improvement of the continent's social and economic policies. The creation of this journal adds value to our quest for development and democracy for Mozambique and for the world.

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