

Democracy and Autocracy in Africa

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ABSTRACT: Contrary to the widespread claims of democratic regression in sub-Saharan Africa, our research on democratic processes reveals a different reality. We have found that the region's democratic journey over the past two decades has largely remained stagnant, with no significant advancements or setbacks in terms of political and civil liberties since the initial transitions in the early 1990s. However, this apparent lack of progress in African democratization masks the active efforts of incumbent leaders to undermine key actors, such as civil society, and structural conditions, such as urbanization, that could potentially lead to greater liberalization. To explain the uneven progress in democratization, despite increased political participation across the region, we argue that Africa's incumbent leaders have employed two often overlooked processes: legal institutions and international relationships. Firstly, these leaders have utilized the law and courts to restrict the ability of domestic actors to mobilize against them. By strategically using the law to consolidate their power and strengthen executive authority, they have undermined other institutional checks and balances. Secondly, incumbent leaders have effectively manipulated their international relationships to counteract the democratizing influence of external actors, including foreign donors and transnational civil society. This manipulation includes employing claims of sovereignty to resist external intervention in domestic politics.

INTRODUCTION

In recent times, there has been a surge in the democratization process worldwide, and Africa is experiencing a renewed push towards the advancement of democracy and good governance. Across the entire African continent, from the North to the East, South, and West, autocratic regimes are giving way to democratic governments. This newfound drive for democracy and good governance is spreading rapidly throughout Africa, akin to a wildfire, and numerous African nations have recently transitioned from authoritarian rule to democratic forms of governance, aligning with the global trend. Elections play a crucial role in the global democratization process as they serve as an institutionalized means of realizing the essence of democracy, which is the rule of the people, by the people, and for the people¹.

However, many democratic elections in Africa have been plagued by significant controversy and violence. Corruption, widespread electoral fraud, ballot box theft, political violence, and the winner-takes-all mentality have all had a detrimental impact on the democratic process. In numerous African countries, the announcement of election results is met with violent protests. Peaceful transitions of power from ruling parties to opposition parties are rare, and many leaders have clung to power indefinitely, becoming de facto life presidents².

Moreover, there is a prevailing sense of apathy among the electorate towards elections, particularly among those residing in rural areas. They perceive the state as having little or no relevance to their lives, primarily due to the state's failure to provide social security or any form of social citizenship. Consequently, a significant portion of the population feels alienated.

Recognizing the importance of promoting universal values and principles such as democracy, good governance, human rights, and the right to development, and committed to enhancing good governance through the establishment of transparency, accountability, and participatory democracy, the African Union has adopted the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (the Charter). This charter serves as a framework for promoting and strengthening good governance across the African continent.

The million-dollar question that needs an answer is how credible is the democracy that comes from the ballot box? This is because, the independence of most election management bodies in Africa is questionable. This goes further to justify why there is frequent

¹ Arriola, Leonardo R., Lise Rakner, and Nicolas van de Walle, 'Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention', in Leonardo R. Arriola, Lise Rakner, and Nicolas van de Walle (eds), *Democratic Backsliding in Africa? Autocratization, Resilience, and Contention* (Oxford, 2022; online edn, Oxford Academic, 19 Jan. 2023), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192867322.003.0001>, accessed 29 Apr. 2024.

² Bleck, J. and N. van de Walle. 2019. *Electoral Politics in Africa since 1990: Continuity and Change*. Cambridge University Press.

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post-election violence, as parties to elections find it difficult to accept election results. The credibility of the elections management bodies is always on the balance.

It is for this reason and more, that this paper will be discussing the importance of democracy from the ballot box and drawing a comparative analysis with democracy gotten through coup, all within the African continent. The paper shall end with the place of the African Union in safeguarding democratic principles within the continent to align with its vision 2065 and make policy recommendations for a more democratic continent.

Democratic Process in Africa

The process of democracy within the African continent varies from one state to another. Some states have achieved it through the ballot box, which is the right thing to do, while others have achieved theirs through coups. The bottom line is that, there is a change in leadership, which is the cry of many African nations. Conflicts in Africa are common in most democratic processes. This is because during the struggle for independence, the continent went through the problem of boundary due to the partition done by the colonial masters³.

African conflicts stem from a complex combination of historical and current factors, encompassing economic, social, and political conditions. During the 1885 Berlin Conference, Africa was divided into arbitrary territorial units by colonial powers, disregarding existing kingdoms, states, and communities. This led to the merging of unrelated areas and the separation of united peoples. When African states gained independence in the 1960s, they inherited these colonial boundaries, which posed challenges to their territorial integrity and efforts to achieve national unity. Some new states faced additional difficulties due to colonial laws and institutions that exploited local divisions. However, the serious conflicts over state boundaries have largely diminished, thanks to the Organization of African Unity's decision in 1963 to accept the colonial boundaries. Nonetheless, the task of forging a genuine national identity among diverse ethnic groups remains a challenge in most African countries. The main threats to the territorial integrity of African states arise from challenges to national boundaries, minority demands for self-determination and secession, and cross-border disputes. Mediation or adjudication has been the preferred approach for resolving these issues, although there have been instances where countries have resorted to occupying contested areas by force and later presenting their arguments. African states overwhelmingly condemn secession, as it not only violates the OAU charter but also poses a threat that most African states fear.

Despite the negative perception of African countries as the birthplace of dictators and despots, there are signs of hope and optimism in the region. Over the past two decades, there has been a significant expansion of liberal democracy in Africa. In the 1990s, democratic reforms spread throughout the entire continent, including South Africa where the oppressive apartheid system was replaced by a multi-party democracy⁴. From Algeria to the Democratic Republic of Congo and from Benin to Kenya, democratic reforms resulted in the downfall of long-standing single-party dictatorships and military rule. The democratic wave that swept across Africa in the 1990s and 2000s has been referred to as the "second independence," reminiscent of the anti-colonial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s that brought an end to European colonialism in Africa.

Africa was not expected to undergo democratization. It lacked many of the essential elements required for constitutional democratic systems. The political and economic cultures in numerous African nations remain undeveloped and volatile. They do not possess the vital prerequisites for establishing liberal democracy, including a robust and autonomous middle class, a competitive party system, constitutionalism and the rule of law, an impartial bureaucracy, and thriving market economies. Consequently, constructing a liberal democracy becomes challenging within this context.

Democratic Decline in Africa

The term "democratic recession" broadly refers to the state's failure to uphold democratic principles such as the rule of law, fair elections, state legitimacy, minority rights, fundamental human rights, and freedom of the press. Democracy is not simply about holding elections and majority rule, but also encompasses accountability, respect for human rights, and adherence to the rule of law⁵. A democratic system should have checks and balances, ensuring the freedom of civil society and the media. However, the mere presence of elections does not guarantee the strength of a democracy. Authoritarian states have learned to manipulate elections without truly embracing democratic values.

In many African countries, it is common for leaders to disregard presidential term limits. Leaders in Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Togo, Tanzania, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, and Guinea have either attempted or successfully manipulated elections and democratic institutions to extend their time in power. For example, President Alpha Condé's attempt to amend the constitution for a third term

³ Alizada, N., Cole, R., Gastaldi, L., Grahn, S., Hellmeier, S., Kolvani, P., Lachapelle, J., Lührmann, A., Maerz, S., Pillai, S. and Lindberg, S. (2021). Autocratization turns viral. Democracy report 2021. University of Gothenburg: V-Dem Institute.

⁴ Anderson, D. (2019). Comparative democratization and democratic backsliding: The case for a historical-institutional approach. *Comparative Politics*, 51(4), 645–663.

⁵ Levitsky, S. & Ziblatt, D. (2018). *How democracies die*. UK: Penguin Random House.

<https://www.eui.eu/Documents/DepartmentsCentres/SPS/ResearchAndTeaching/How-Democracies-Die.pdf>

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in Guinea led to a military coup in September 2021 and an increase in human rights violations, resulting in the country's downgrade from a partly free to a not free status. This phenomenon, known as "abusive constitutionalism," involves using constitutional changes to undermine democracy⁶. Although there may be a decrease in the blatant impunity of authoritarian rule worldwide, the resurgence of military coups and the abuse of constitutional changes to prolong leaders' stay in power and undermine democracy remain concerning.

Coup Culture in Africa

The growth of democracy worldwide continues to face a significant threat in the form of military coups. In West Africa, the progress made towards democratic governance has been short-lived and suffered a major setback in 2021. The resurgence of military coups in Africa indicates the emergence of a coup culture. The year 2021 witnessed a higher number of coups compared to the previous decade. It all began in Myanmar, where the military alleged that the November 2020 elections were fraudulent, leading to a swift military coup. This trend then spread to Sudan, where the military seized power in 2021, declared a state of emergency, and postponed elections until 2023. In Chad, the military took control in April 2021 following the death of Idriss Déby. Additionally, Niger experienced an attempted coup in March 2021. Meanwhile, Mali endured two coups within a span of 10 months. The president and prime minister of an interim government appointed by ECOWAS were ousted less than a year after overthrowing the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Colonel Assimi Goïta, the orchestrator of both coups, installed himself as the president of the transitional government. Sudan and Guinea also witnessed coups, further fueling concerns about the resurgence of coup activities in the region. On the other hand, Burkina Faso experienced two military coups in 2022, occurring in February and September.

Contributors of Democratic Decline in Africa

After having discussed democratic processes in Africa and also the decline of democracy, it is imperative to look at some of the drivers of this democratic decline within the continent. Governance is one of the contributors⁷. Effective governance plays a crucial role in the advancement of democracy; therefore, any erosion of governance undermines the progress of democracy. Another is state capture and corruption. State capture refers to the process in which economic and political entities seize control of state institutions in order to advance their own interests and favoritism towards patronage. This phenomenon undermines the government's capacity to effectively represent the interests of society and consequently weakens democracy. Insecurity is another contributor to democratic decline in Africa. In West Africa, there is no question that fragility, conflicts, and violence are prevalent due to the actions of violent extremists, insurgent groups, terrorist organizations, militant pastoralists, and other violent non-state actors. This insecurity not only jeopardizes governance but also hinders the progress of democracy in the region.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Democracy is founded on the principles of upholding the rule of law, conducting free and fair elections, establishing state legitimacy, protecting minority rights, ensuring fundamental human rights, and preserving press freedom. By embracing democracy, African nations positioned themselves to adopt these principles in contrast to their previously oppressive political tendencies. However, despite these advancements, many countries in Africa still exhibit characteristics of a cult of personality, party control, authoritarian rule, and a tendency for leaders to cling to power. As a result, a blend of democratic and authoritarian elements has emerged, giving rise to a competitive authoritarian regime or an electoral autocracy. In such systems, certain democratic features like elections, opposition parties, and competition are allowed to exist in order to avoid international sanctions. However, practices such as electoral fraud, harassment, patronage, media control, and violence persist as systematic methods to hinder regime change and maintain the incumbent in power.

Based on the findings presented in this research, the subsequent recommendations are proposed as the most effective practices that African leaders should adopt. It is crucial to note that without citizen participation, rights, and inclusion in the decision-making process of the political system, any society will lack meaningful development and democratic sustainability. Therefore, it is imperative to prioritize good governance in order to reverse the concerning trend of democratic regression in Africa. The principles of governance should encompass the rule of law, citizen participation, rights, and inclusion, while ensuring that the mechanisms of legality and parliamentary control are allowed to function properly. It is essential to guarantee credible, free, and fair elections, and to uphold the outcomes of such elections. To achieve these goals, significant attention should be given to strengthening state institutions, such as the legislature and the judiciary, rather than focusing on cultivating cult personalities or promoting executive power. These institutions must also embrace the culture of respecting constitutional provisions regarding term limits, while simultaneously working towards establishing state legitimacy by combating cronyism.

⁶ Diamond, L. (2008). The democratic rollback: The resurgence of the predatory state. *Foreign Affairs*, 87(2), 36–48.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20032579>

⁷ Norris P. "What Drives Democracy"? In *Driving Democracy, Do Power-sharing Institution work?* Cambridge University Press; 2008: 3-36

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