

DEMOCRACY AS IDEA AND DEMOCRACY AS PROCESS IN AFRICA

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Democracy is an idea. It is deployed as an analytic concept, a normative ideal, a political prescription, and an empirical description. Its meanings slide among these usages. The idea of democracy is real in its far-reaching consequences. Democracy is, therefore, also a process.¹

The first part of this essay, on democracy as idea, starts from the argument that political concepts such as democracy are “essentially contested”: we cannot, therefore, necessarily agree on their core meaning. Their meanings will depend on the ways in which they are used in specific historical contexts. This perspective opens a bridge between historical narrative and conceptual analysis with which both historians and political philosophers tend to feel uncomfortable. It then explores the elementary forms of democratic politics and the non-democratic conditions of democracy. It critically examines alternative conceptions of democracy, showing that they cannot get round the essential contestedness of the concept. It rejects the teleological assumptions implicit in theories of democratization. The second part, on democracy as process, explores the themes of nationalism, community, class, development, economic strategies, international debt, and multi-party elections and their implications for democratic politics. The conclusion argues that democratic politics requires us to create scope for permanent dialogue.

Democracy As an “Essentially Contested” Concept

In 1956 W.B. Gallie argued that aesthetic, ethical and political concepts, such as Art, or Democracy, are “essentially contested”.² Though we may agree broadly on the elements that constitute a concept and on classic exemplars of its meaning in use, we cannot always expect to reach agreement on its meaning or its proper application. These will be a matter for continuing argument. We cannot necessarily agree on an “ineliminable core” or find an “anchor” or lay down the outer limits to a concept.³ The contest is over its essence.⁴

Since “essentially contested concepts” are used to appraise works of art, private and public actions, or social institutions, the contest may appear to be over the ways in which we each use them to suit our own aesthetic, moral or political arguments. Are we confusing different concepts by attaching the same word to them and arguing past one another? Gallie’s argument has deeper roots than the observation that we suit our concepts to our political purposes. “Essentially contested concepts,” such as democracy, liberty, state, or power are complex “clusters.”⁵ They share “family resemblances”; like Wittgenstein’s thread, their strength “does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.”⁶ Their past and current usages include different elements, which are often in tension with one another. We may disagree on the relative weighting and priority of different elements, or on the ways in which they need to relate to one another. These concepts are incomplete in themselves. They acquire their full meanings only when they are deployed in specific arguments and are used in specific social and historical contexts. There is thus scope for continuing dialogue as we each advance reasons for our preferred conceptions and applications of concepts. There are better and worse arguments, but no “best” or “best possible” answers.⁷

The Elementary Forms of Democratic Politics

Alternative conceptions of democracy elaborate Lincoln's aphorism: "Government of the people, by the people, for the people," and of the conditions needed for its realization.⁸ They do not resolve the problems of complexity and ambiguity. L. Diamond, J. Linz and S.M. Lipset define democracy as, "meaningful and extensive competition...for...positions of government power through regular, free, and fair elections... inclusive political participation in the election of leaders and policies, such that no major social group is prevented from exercising the rights of citizenship. ... Civil and political liberties...secured through political equality under a rule of law, sufficient to ensure that citizens can develop and advocate their views and interests and contest policies and offices..."⁹ These conditions spell out the implications of Robert Dahl's rigorous standards: effective participation, voting equality, enlightened understanding, inclusion of adults, and control of the agenda.¹⁰

Conceptions of "citizenship," "participation," and "liberties" identify the conditions that are to be met if elections are to be "democratic." Each linked concept takes on the complexities of defining each of the others. The "essential contestability" of democracy cannot therefore be avoided by adopting Joseph Schumpeter's minimal description of democracy as "that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote."¹¹ The lack of unambiguous criteria for what is to count as "democratic government" or "a free and fair" election leaves considerable discretion to those making and acting on such judgments.

Because the concept of democracy does not look out across its own field, fenced off from neighboring concepts, its advocates typically hyphenate the concept

into constitutional, liberal, or social democracy. These qualifications refer, in part, to the conditions that must be met for democracy to exist. They draw attention to the need for a prior constitutional framework, laws, and procedures defining and safeguarding civil rights, or sufficient material equalities among citizens for them to be able to participate effectively in the political process. They place limits on decisions which elected governments should be able to take and indicate the sorts of outcomes desired from a democratic political order. Lars Rudebeck and Adebayo Olukoshi argue that constitutional politics should itself be democratic, rooted in “popular sovereignty” and “social citizenship.”¹² The argument turns full circle.

Democratic politics operates within boundaries of shared conventions defining the procedures, capacities, and limits of electoral, legislative, administrative, and executive bodies. Constitutions arise from political compromises rather than reflecting broad discussions of the principles that should govern political arrangements. “Sovereign” national conferences have facilitated the succession from authoritarian to elected governments in some African countries, as did the Multi-Party Conference in South Africa.¹³ Constitution-making gives participants an opportunity to advance their interests and enables political minorities to secure agreement to claims that would be overridden by majority votes: hence the length and detail of South Africa’s constitution.¹⁴ National conferences are always potentially unstable as new élites consolidate their positions and initial balances of power give way to new configurations. Nigerian constitutional conferences have exposed the inability of constituent governments and rival parties to agree on the terms on which they are to associate.¹⁵ Constitutional provisions have far-reaching consequences, intended and unintended. Several elected governments in Africa have come to grief over the prerogatives of governors or presidents and prime ministers or legislatures.¹⁶

The nation state marks out the boundaries within which democratic forms of political representation and accountability operate. If the state is “a compulsory association which organizes domination,” the terms on which we associate in a democratic polity cannot be a matter of voluntary choice or contractual agreement.¹⁷ But the authority of the state is not sufficient unto itself. It may have to provide forms of representation and accountability in order to expand the constituencies pursuing their interests through state institutions and to secure acceptance among those it governs. For most citizens, the state and its functionaries are only accessible at local, or possibly regional and provincial levels, even if the decisions that most affect are made at the national level or in international arenas. Public engagement in civic activities may provide a basis for social cohesion within and across communities and contribute to forming a democratic political culture. But it will not do so if it separates people politically along religious, ethnic, or class lines.¹⁸

Conflicts over the rules of the game, how they are to be interpreted, and who is to interpret them undermine the shared acceptance of the constitutional framework.¹⁹ Democracies depend on the prior acceptance of the non-democratic conditions of democracy just as contracts depend on “non-contractual relations.”²⁰

Representation, Accountability, and Deliberation

Democratic elections enable people to choose who will represent their views, interests, and concerns in legislatures and other public arenas. They also enable people to decide collectively who will govern them. These may take place through the same mechanism, casting a ballot, but are not quite the same thing. As politicians well understand, electoral systems, rules defining who is a citizen and who is qualified to

vote or to stand for election, constituency boundaries, and intimidation determine electoral outcomes and define legislative and presidential majorities.

Who can speak for whom? Which sort of groups or interests can, or should be “represented”? Which women can speak for other women?²¹ Elected representatives rarely share the social characteristics of most of their electors, and often for good reason. In Nigeria, provisions to ensure representation of provinces at the center and to rotate national offices among ethno-regional zones only exacerbate the continued displacement of class politics by the politics of patronage and tribute taking.

Mark Philp observes that accountability to those who elect politicians (or fund their campaigns) may be at variance with accountability to rules governing the conduct of office-holders. Politicians may satisfy constituents by breaking rules. Institutions designed to prevent corruption may be used for partisan ends subject to allegations of racial, ethnic, or political bias. Formal procedures to investigate breaches of trust by office holders are costly and may discourage public servants from making difficult decisions. It is better if citizens can rely on the professional ethic of public servants to carry out their duties and protect the public purse. Commercialization of public services gives public officials discretion to allocate profitable opportunities. It is difficult to sustain a “political culture which takes professional integrity and public service seriously” when private advantage is represented as the way to secure the performance of public functions.²²

If the purpose of democracy is to represent groups, interests, preferences or views, it can only do so imperfectly. Moreover, it rests on the atomistic foundation of individuals, or of sectional groups, each bearing, pursuing, and negotiating over their interests or preferences. “If interest relates men, it does so only for some few

moments.”²³ Interests may coincide or overlap but provide no reason, other than *force majeure*, for people to accept decisions and policies that go against their interests.

“Deliberative democracy” as a normative ideal proceeds “through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens.”²⁴ Autonomous decision-making by citizens requires “that all have enough, and none have too much.”²⁵ These ideals cannot be met if agendas are set by those who can buy politicians or political office; or by the impersonal operations of capital markets; or if the state can subordinate those who depend on its favor and deny their autonomy or even their citizenship.

The deliberative ideal offers an answer to the problem of persuading people to accept decisions that are in conflict with their interests. We accept laws, even if we do not agree with them, because they have been subject to public debate and democratic decisions. This requires acceptance of the values, including a commitment to “public reason”, necessary to shared participation in a political community.²⁶ It therefore excludes from the political sphere comprehensive religious or moral doctrines that deny others political citizenship. Democracy depends on its own self-limitation. Not all questions and decisions can be open to majority decisions.

Philp argues that democracy can best be defined and justified as a set of procedures, which leave open, within limits, the range of outcomes produced.²⁷ This does not get around the issue of “essential contestability.” No procedures for aggregating preferences or promoting deliberation or securing political consent, alone or in combination, can be shown to be superior to all others and to be appropriate under all circumstances. If democracy is to be defined by its procedures, we are likely to select them in accordance with the substantive goals we think they are likely to realize. But without some agreement to adhere to formal rules, and to accept their

outcomes, democratic politics and institutions are likely to give way before the unrestrained pursuit of immediate gain.

The Idea of Democratization

The literature on democratization frames it as a single, albeit complex, evolutionary process in which defined stages towards the realization of “democracy” can be recognized. Appropriate institutional structures can then be created to promote, sustain, and consolidate it or ward off the dangers of reversal.²⁸ Evolutionary models of this sort have a strong attraction to policy-makers and their advisers. If the world is to be managed in practice, it must be ordered conceptually. If we know in which direction things are tending, we can steer them along the appropriate path. Lawrence Whitehead makes a virtue of the normative and teleological implications of democratization, not as a linear if two-directional process, but as a “long-term and somewhat open-ended outcome... a socially desirable and imaginary future.”²⁹ Democracy is not a state of affairs that can finally be achieved. Nor can there be one or more linear paths towards democratization, marked by stages of transition and consolidation. It is not like a game of “snakes and ladders”, in which steady progress is interrupted by unexpected advances and long slides backward to the start.³⁰

Democratic claims should never be taken for granted, anywhere. In arguing for democracy in Africa, we should not take as exemplars flawed and imaginary models of ‘western democracy’. In the U.S. “democracy” accommodated slavery for seventy-seven years; alternatively, the U.S. was a remarkably late democratizer, extending the vote to all its adult citizens only in 1965.³¹ The British Prime Minister can still exercise the royal prerogative, with or without parliamentary approval. The current U.S. and British governments show no regard for the civil liberties of so-

called “enemy combatants.” The politics of democracy must be a continuing battle to hold those in power accountable, to protect the liberties of citizens and residents, to secure effective political representation, and to give people a say over the ways they are governed and the decisions which affect their lives. It involves defining, defending, and creating the institutions and the structures which promote these goals and facilitate debates about public issues, including the nature and conditions of democratic politics.

Democracy as Process in the Politics of Africa

To argue that no single conception of democracy can have priority over all others is not to imply that each conception is as good as any other. To the contrary, it is to bring out the need for “permanent dialogue” on the meaning of democracy, on the conditions for its existence, and on the criteria for defining and evaluating practices and institutions in specific historical contexts.³² We should discuss democracy, in its multiple meanings, and its implications in African contexts, without apologizing for African tyrants and their international patrons by pleading for a “tropical” or “African” version of democracy.³³

Making Imagined Communities Real³⁴

Conquest and trade, in people and commodities, incorporated Africans into a wider global economy. In the 19th century European colonial powers mapped out their territories and subordinated African polities to their rule. Colonial rule redefined state forms, social identities, gender relations, religious beliefs, and class relations. Rail and road networks reoriented African producers and economies to changing global economic networks. Colonial economies subordinated African producers to the

requirements of new, and often coercive, labor regimes and patterns of cultivation to meet the requirements of European-controlled railways, mines, farmers, and plantations. It also opened new economic opportunities through urban employment, commercial activities, and Western education for a small minority of indigenous Africans.³⁵ Multiple and contested forms of law—civil, Shari'a, and traditional—sought to define relations of gender and generation, and rules governing access and succession to land and property.³⁶ Colonial administrators using a system of “indirect rule” incorporated African rulers as intermediaries within a hierarchy of chiefs.³⁷ Their post-colonial successors adopted or re-established the forms of territorial administration or “decentralized despotism,” within the boundaries the colonial administrators had previously exercised authority.³⁸

African nationalists followed Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah’s advice to “seek first the political kingdom.”³⁹ They sought state power as a means to transfer control of political office and economic resources from foreigners to Africans.⁴⁰ They mobilized political support to establish their democratic credentials to be the authentic representatives of the people. Popular demonstrations, election campaigns, and armed resistance were the means by which nationalists sought to establish themselves as the *interlocuteur valables* with whom colonial and settler governments would have to negotiate a new political settlement. Control of the state conferred authority to rule its subjects, to exact taxes and rents from imports and exports, to receive aid and contract sovereign debts, and to decide to whom to allocate public resources. The state would take responsibility for bringing development to Africa, thus giving material substance to the political promise of democracy. The state was central to achieving the goals of nationalism and development. It was and is both the object of and the key instrument in the continuing battle to gain power and keep it.⁴¹

Most Africans are Muslims or Christians, though many also turn to indigenous religious beliefs and practices. States have been confronted by religious sects inspired by prophetic leaders and the resistance of believers who reject the claims of “secular” authorities. Many join charismatic religious movements to solve their private problems within a new moral and social order. Evangelists bless the prosperity of the rich, offer hope of rewards to the many, and give solace to the poor. Successful preachers attract far greater followings than any political movements.⁴²

Prior to colonial rule, Africans defined their identities by their status within specific political communities and colonial rulers demarcated them along administrative lines. The local peoples now acquired interests in excluding outsiders from *their* resources. Africans shaped new ethnic identities out of varied experiences of migration and urbanization, subordination and competition, religious belief and conversion.⁴³ What the layered forms of ethnicity have in common is the ways in which identities came to define at all levels of society people’s access to resources.

Afrikaner and African nationalists spoke for their newly imagined and socially and politically real “pan-ethnic” communities. These new identities often advanced the social, political, and economic aspirations of bourgeois élites. They were usually defined by languages, which were standardized into common, written forms in the 20th century. Kikuyu, Yoruba, and northern Nigerians emulated the success of Afrikaner nationalists in South Africa in mobilizing ethnically based alliances to gain access to the state and control over the allocation of resources to promote development for themselves and their communities.⁴⁴ Hence the attraction to the commercial, as well as the bureaucratic, middle classes of socialism in its African, Marxist-Leninist and other variants, and the tendency to extend state activity and intervention in the economy. The National Party government in South Africa could

enrich its close associates, while advancing the economic interests and conditions for the Afrikaners by excluding indigenous Africans from the benefits and making them bear most of the costs. In the post-apartheid era in South Africa it was easier to empower a new black élite than to provide resources to the indigenous African majority.⁴⁵

Nationalists came to power in the name of the people by more or less democratic procedures. Power gave them control of the state and the capacity to allocate its resources. Unfortunately, many were unwilling to risk losing control by the test of elections, and force, rather than ballots, came to arbitrate in struggles for power.

Monopolizing the State

The exclusive claims of nationalist parties denied legitimacy to rival movements or ideologies, and political opposition was attributed to foreign influences or sectional interests. Nationalists drew on colonial representations to create their own visions of “African civilization,” rooted in imagined forms of community, and attacked foreign ideologies.⁴⁶ For radical nationalists, socialism became another name for nationalism. Once in power, the new rulers sought to monopolize office. Their opponents usually had to choose between “crossing the carpet” to join the ruling alliance or suffering exclusion, repression, or even assassination.⁴⁷ In a number of countries, rival parties proved unable to settle regional conflicts and resolve their own rivalries within an agreed constitutional framework. Party competition gave way to military governments, ethnic conflict, and even civil wars.⁴⁸

In most African countries, ruling parties formed “one-party states.” They claimed legitimacy from their leadership of the national struggle and the need to

overcome ethnic and regional divisions, and to unite the people in pursuit of development, and even socialism. The politics of spoils undermined state revenues and intensified the competition for state offices and resources. This led to the concentration of declining resources and political power in fewer hands and increased political repression. Military governments replaced several one-party régimes, in some cases after general strikes and popular uprisings and usually to popular acclaim.

Several one-party governments survived the initial wave of military coups and provided a stable form of government for nearly three decades after independence. They were usually headed by venerable leaders of nationalist parties. These governments combined centralized, bureaucratic direction of policy and territorial administration and a regional distribution of patronage.⁴⁹ Policies were decided and implemented by ministers and civil servants, under presidential authority. Some allowed elections for parliamentary seats, which turned on local rivalries and the ability of candidates to secure resources for their constituents. Presidential nominations were not contested.

Military rulers typically claimed to act in the name of the whole nation against the corruption and sectionalism of local politicians “for army reasons.”⁵⁰ Military interventions tend to create further political instability. Coups divided armies along lines of rank and generation, and often set precedents for further coups.⁵¹ Radical military officers took power with a populist platform in Uganda, Ghana, and Upper Volta (Burkina Faso). They soon accepted the neo-liberal economic guidance of the IMF, but retained a distrust of representative politics and created the same forms of decentralized rule as successful one-party states.

Governments in Africa extended the centralization of revenues from export taxes, minerals, tariffs or aid flows, which were then redistributed to state or

provincial and local governments, which raise hardly any taxes of their own, a sure recipe for patronage politics and increased communal conflict. Politicians demanded for their communities their “rightful share” of political offices and state resources. Governments in Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, and Nigeria expelled long-term resident foreigners. Spoils politics provided a very partial form of participation, undermined any rational consideration and implementation of public policies, and displaced class politics.⁵² Unconstrained spoils politics undermined the authority of states, which in some cases surrendered their “monopoly of the legitimate use of violence” to warlords, vigilantes and their own soldiers.⁵³ This spiral is very difficult to reverse.

Class and Politics

Post-colonial African states have been the engines of class formation. A distinctive political class controls, or aspires to control, access to state offices and public resources.⁵⁴ State favors allowed an avaricious few to acquire vast fortunes and enabled others to accumulate capital or land. Many successful capitalists owe their wealth to their entrepreneurial abilities rather than their privileged relationship to the state or to foreign business.⁵⁵ They may need access to the state, and to foreign firms, to pursue their business activities. Dependence on government decisions limits the capacity of local capitalists to pursue their collective interests.⁵⁶

The expansion of education, jobs, and commercial opportunities after independence augmented the middle classes. They created a rich associational life, focused around communities of origin, churches and mosques, or commercial or professional groups through which they pursue public activities and claim status and respect from their peers and communities. Their modest prosperity was undermined by the economic crises of the 1980s. Middle class professionals also have been active

in expanding non-governmental organizations (NGOs), acting in the name of “civil society.” In the 1980s external funders promoted NGOs as an alternative provider of services, independent of, and even opposed to, the state. This allowed NGOs to offer attractive salaries, but made them dependent on foreign patronage and changing fashions among international development agencies. Some NGOs defended human rights but most need to work with governments departments to realize their goals. Governments have sought to co-opt NGOs, and to organize their own NGOs.⁵⁷

Industrial development and state employment expanded the working class. Workers have generally embarked on strikes to demand higher wages or reductions in the prices of food or gasoline. Wages generally increased just before or after independence but have since fallen far behind inflation. Many governments strengthened the funding and organization of labor unions and often incorporated them into the ruling party, the better to manage industrial unrest. But when trade unions proved unable to prevent strikes, some governments divided them and suppressed workers’ demands. Workers’ actions have provided a focus for popular discontent with corrupt governments and sometimes prompted their removal. They provided leadership for political opposition to authoritarian governments in South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The ability of trade unions to protect their members’ interests generally depends on maintaining a degree of autonomy from the demands of the government or the priorities of political movements.⁵⁸

States followed colonial precedents in seeking, without success, to order rural people to conform to plans for their betterment. They decentralized administration to village or district development councils in Zimbabwe and Lesotho to extend the reach of central government.⁵⁹ In Tanzania, Moçambique, Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda government officials have forced people to live in villages to bring development to

them, make them grow cotton, or protect them from insurrectionary forces.⁶⁰ Since the colonial period, some governments have found it difficult to get rural people to conform to the plans for their advancement. They have been confronted by organized local resistance to forced removals, increased taxes, and official extortion. But rural people are poorly placed to act collectively to affect the composition or policies of national governments.⁶¹ Their access to state resources generally depends on the paltry trickle-down of benefits through layered patronage relations.

Class politics in Africa has sometimes taken the form of resistance to exactions and repression by capitalists and the state. It has rarely been translated into institutional arrangements, other than collective bargaining by labor unions, which enable people to advance their economic interests through representative organizations. The African bourgeoisie have proved ineffective in defining their collective interests or making governments accountable to them.

Bringing Development to the People

Independent African governments found themselves economically dependent on foreign markets for their agricultural and mineral exports. They inherited the late colonial strategies of taxing peasants and investing in infrastructure to promote industrial growth.⁶² State regulation was extended and initially the benefits of development were spread broadly in the form of industrial investment, state employment, formal education, hospitals and clinics, and rural development. However, these activities expanded beyond their fiscal and administrative capacities, and these governments could not sustain social spending in the face of lack of funds, import scarcities, and debt repayments.

Irrigation and rural development projects, funded by international loans, started from the supply of biochemical technologies, rather than market demand, and often overlooked the knowledge and adaptability of African farmers, provided lucrative opportunities to soldiers, politicians, local and foreign contractors and consultants; disrupted rural peoples' lives, and did little to increase agricultural production. Successes were achieved in Kenya, for example, in transferring land to small farmers enabling them to expand production for local and export markets, though not always in accordance with the conceptions of planners and policy-makers.⁶³

Africans and their livestock are vulnerable to endemic and epidemic diseases. Most Africans lack access to clean water. Silicosis, tuberculosis and, other diseases arising from working and living conditions are widespread. Immunization has achieved major successes, such as small pox and yellow fever, but as yet offers no answer to trypanosomiasis or the capacity of malarial parasites to resist drugs. Transmission of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), causing acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), has spread across Africa most rapidly during wars, along trucking routes, and among migrant workers. Its prevalence undermines the public institutions and kinship networks required to cope with its consequences. Anti-retroviral drugs and research into HIV vaccines both confront the capacity of HIV viruses to assume new forms. There is a need to change male sexual behavior and overcome fatalism and denial by individuals and institutions in the face of the spread of the disease, the lack of any cure, and the prohibitive costs of treating its symptoms. Indigenous treatments offer people afflicted with AIDS symptoms alternative explanations of their origins and plausible, though quite ineffective, ways of countering them.⁶⁴

The Ugandan government's contribution to the modest reduction of the prevalence and incidence of HIV suggests that steps can be taken to reduce its spread, but the government's role may have been exaggerated.⁶⁵ Its "success" justifies foreign aid for Uganda and funds for a global fight against AIDS. International agencies, drug companies, NGOs, and African governments struggle and compete to secure their share of these funds and the capacity to allocate them. Pharmaceutical companies offer to supply anti-retrovirals to governments at discounted prices, but their major concern is to defend their international patent rights and market monopolies for drugs against the claims of governments to the right to produce generic substitutes or import from lowest cost suppliers. Anti-retrovirals can reduce HIV transmission from mothers to children. The resources required to administer a rigorous regime of anti-retrovirals for most sufferers are beyond the capacities of most African governments. Governments, doctors and market demand will decide which HIV-positive people will be helped.⁶⁶

Public health institutions in Africa have not achieved many of the objectives for which they were created, or provided people with ways to agree on public goals and how to bring them about. They have tended to serve the immediate interests of those in power and exacerbated inequalities in access to material resources.

Development and Debt

The debt crisis in Africa arose out of profligate spending by governments, fueled by loans from international agencies and banks. Import protection secured monopolistic markets for local industries and investors. But industries imported more than they exported, and this strategy increased the dependence of African economies on their exports. Many governments tried to limit inflation by maintaining high

currency exchange rates and regulating access to foreign exchange and imported goods. They penalized exporters and encouraged demand for imports, resulting in the collapse of export earnings, scarcity of imports, and pervasive smuggling and corruption. Political competition turned on control of access to imports and foreign currency, intensifying contests to control state office.⁶⁷

In the 1970s governments in Africa and throughout the developing world borrowed money, far beyond their capacity to repay from commercial banks, foreign governments, and the World Bank. In the 1980s they were faced with declining export prices and high real interest rates. The ensuing debt crisis created the need and provided the opportunity for the IMF and the World Bank to introduce structural adjustment programs (SAPs). New economic orthodoxies, emphasising the virtues of markets, displaced an older faith in the capacity of states to promote development. Initially, the international financial institutions promoted state development projects by lending money to governments. Now they imposed market-oriented programs in the same way.⁶⁸

Governments and politicians were loath to surrender control of their currencies, preferring devaluation to encourage exports and reduce the demand for imports. If government spending and the supply of money and credit are not kept firmly in check, the demand for foreign currency and imports will rise, leading to further devaluation, or a widening gap between official and parallel (black market) exchange rates. Unless governments reduce arms imports and military salaries, spending on health, education, water and other services must suffer. The burden of SAPs falls most heavily on wage and salary earners, who cannot pass on the effects of rising prices and on poor consumers of public services.⁶⁹

The effectiveness of SAPs depends on the mechanisms adopted to implement them and the extent of follow through. For example, the falling exchange rate of the naira widened the differences between gasoline prices in Nigeria and in neighboring countries. Increases in the gasoline prices did not remove the discrepancy; instead it caused strikes, smuggling, hoarding and severe fuel shortages. In Ghana and Uganda, government revenues and foreign exchange benefited from the sharp increase in official prices for cocoa and coffee. In contrast, in Zambia devaluation raised food prices, but could not attract the investments needed to rehabilitate the copper mines.⁷⁰ SAPs may improve the use of industrial capacity and access to consumer goods, but small and large firms face competition from imports (with reduced trade protection), the fall in the value of East Asian currencies, and stagnant consumer demand. Industrial countries maintain unscalable tariff walls against textiles and agricultural products, with concessionary quotas for “least developed countries.”⁷¹

International agencies have found it difficult to enforce all the complex conditions they have laid down. Loans are used in a continuing process of negotiations over the adoption and implementation of economic reforms. Governments may meet some conditions but not others, or only meet set targets in part. Measures required to satisfy some requirements may obstruct the realization of others.⁷² Even when governments have increased official exports, participated in Poverty Reduction Strategies, reduced their fiscal deficits, and benefited from programs to write off some of their debts, they continue to pay substantial sums each year to service their debts. Twenty-six African countries are receiving debt relief under the Enhanced Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative. Half of them spend more on debt service than on public health.⁷³

The New Economic Partnership for African Development (NePAD) seeks freer access to developed country markets, increased direct foreign investment, and radical reduction of international debts, which the G-8 countries show no sign of facilitating.⁷⁴ NePAD plans to co-ordinate international public investment in health, education, roads and infrastructure, and harmonize currency arrangements and trade policies. African notables will involve “civil” organizations in peer reviews of corporate and state governance and democratic politics. Its objectives align African governments with the evolving policy discourses and priorities of the international financial agencies. Their achievement depends more than ever on international markets and economic conditions and decisions by governments of developed countries and international monetary agencies.

Multi-Party Elections

Governments throughout Africa increasingly have to claim the legitimacy of democratic elections. During the 1980s the contraction of resources at their disposal led those in power to appropriate ever-larger shares for themselves. This narrowed politicians’ capacity to co-opt local élites and maintain a measure of public acceptance. They lacked the credibility to persuade workers and others to accept the imposition of structural adjustment programs. Civilian and military governments, whether capitalist or socialist in orientation, found their authority to be under threat. International agencies began to push them towards multi-party elections.

Léopold Senghor initiated the move away from one-party politics in Sénégal in 1976. The ruling party retained control of political patronage, the electoral machinery, and the security services until divisions within the party and its loss of support among Muslim religious leaders allowed Abdoulaye Wade to win in 2000.⁷⁵ In 1990 strikes

in Benin against the bankrupt military government led to a national conference, which declared itself sovereign and elected its own prime minister, who was elected president the following year.⁷⁶ National conferences, representing multiple parties and personalities, were repeated elsewhere.⁷⁷ In Togo, Gnassingbé Eyadema kept control of the armed forces and the presidency against the national conferences, as did Mobutu in Congo (Zaire) until he was removed by armed, international invasion. Many one-party governments responded to internal opposition, external pressures, and the risks of national conferences by allowing multi-party elections.

In some countries voters took the opportunity to replace incumbent rulers.⁷⁸ In others the military or civilian rulers retained power through multi-party elections.⁷⁹ Several presidents resisted rules limiting their tenure to two (additional) terms.⁸⁰ Elections have been marked by disputes over procedures, the eligibility and nationality of candidates, and the legitimacy of outcomes.⁸¹ Elected governments often excluded rivals, manipulated elections, and suppressed popular resistance were not immune from military coups as in Gambia (1994), Burundi (1996), Congo-Brazzaville and Sierra Leone (1996), Niger (1996, 1999), Guiné-Bissau (1998, 2003).

In several countries a tripolar division emerged among the main parties, none with a majority of seats.⁸² In Benin, Congo-Brazzaville, Malawi and Niger, presidents could not secure stable coalitions to support their budgets or pass their laws. This facilitated military inventions in Congo-Brazzaville and temporarily in Niger. In Somalia and Congo, parties fragmented into personal cliques and military factions.⁸³

The rulers of Zambia, Kenya, and Malawi reluctantly conceded to international demands and popular pressures for multi-party elections from politicians, businessmen, trade unionists, students and human rights activists who found themselves excluded from access to power or required to pay the costs of fiscal

stringency and state corruption. They all looked to multi-party elections as a way of gaining access to government. Frederick Chiluba, a trade union leader, won the 2001 elections in Zambia for the “Movement for Multiparty Democracy.” He concentrated power at the center and failed to ensure adequate balanced representation of each province. He was not allowed to run for a third term. His successor, Levy Mwanawasa, won the 2001 election thanks to a divided opposition and then withdrew Chiluba’s immunity from investigation for corruption. In Kenya, Daniel arap Moi twice secured re-election by promoting ethnic conflicts and with the help of divisions among his rivals and played potential candidates off against one another to favor his preferred successor, Uhuru Kenyatta. Rivals crossed over to the National Rainbow Coalition, whose candidate, Mwai Kibaki, won the 2002 presidential election.⁸⁴

In Zimbabwe, NGOs initiated the National Constituent Assembly, which was matched by the government’s own Constitutional Commission (CC). The régime rejected the CC’s recommendations to limit the power of the presidency with a prime minister accountable to parliament. The Commission lost the constitutional referendum and only won legislative and presidential elections in 2000 and 2001 by political violence and electoral manipulation.⁸⁵ The transition in South Africa shared features of an initial transfer of power to a nationalist party and of the change from an authoritarian government, unable to resolve its economic crises, to an elected democracy. Support for opposition parties contracted to their ethnic constituencies. The dominant ANC retains the support of most African voters.⁸⁶

In Ghana and Uganda, centralization of power, decentralized administration, and political loyalties had their origins in the period before independence. However, they have persisted through civilian and military, liberal and nationalist regimes, and still shape political styles and electoral loyalties. In Nigeria, military rulers centralized

control and allocation of mineral oil revenues among the states and local governments to meet the claims of “minorities,” thereby creating new “minorities.”⁸⁷ Olusegun Obasanjo was elected president in 1999 and 2003 with support from the political and military establishments. Nigeria continues to be divided by conflicts over constitutional arrangements, the allocation of state resources, rival claims of pan-ethnic and religious groups at federal, state and local levels, and the activities of political vigilantes.

War may be politics by other means; however, negotiations are also a means to secure military gains. War is also a source of profits for rulers, rebels, arms producers and salesmen, foreign mercenaries, and traders in diamonds, timber, and ivory.⁸⁸ The battle to control resources makes it more difficult to get belligerents to agree to and abide by peace agreements. Negotiated compromises and regional interventions have produced political settlements, some more stable than others.⁸⁹ External interventions have often failed to end wars or to protect civilians from armed militias, government troops, or the peacekeepers themselves.⁹⁰ In west and central Africa, conflicts in one country cannot be resolved unless they are settled in all. Financial and logistical difficulties, divisions among African states, and the fragility of governments dependent on outside forces exposed the limitations of regional approaches to security. The new “African Union” has set up arrangements for the Union or “lead governments,” in concert with others, to intervene in crises, but cannot ensure the conditions for successful action.

Multi-party legislatures and limits to the powers of rulers have widened the scope for democratic politics. In several countries the uncertain prospect and outcome of elections have exacerbated communal, religious, and regional conflicts and led to political violence, often initiated by incumbent governments. The political class has

primarily been concerned with gaining and retaining political offices. Politicians mobilize support from ethnic and regional constituencies without creating stable coalitions, and rarely show much concern for issues of public policy. Economic strategies are now directed from without, and new régimes inherited the institutions and problems of the old and tend to repeat many of the political practices of their predecessors.

Citizenship, Accountability, and Democratic Politics

Democracy should not be considered a thing.⁹¹ Nor is it a standard by which we can judge régimes and elections according to lexically ordered criteria. It refers to a range of attributes that inform political practices and the working of institutions. Each of the dominant themes of African politics since 1945, nationalism, communal competition, and development draws on strong democratic ideas — notably that government should be “of the people” (and not just “over the people”) and “for the people,” if not “by the people.” They have all been oriented to capturing the state and controlling the allocation of its resources. Each involves elements that are implicitly anti-democratic.

Nationalists typically lay exclusive claim to being the “authentic” representatives of the people and suppress political differences or alternative claims to speak for “the nation.” The demand for communal representation is primarily a means for élites to claim a share of state resources. Gender, class, and other sources of difference or interest are suppressed.⁹² Little trickles down to voters, even when they have rewarded their “own” leaders for fear that their interests will be completely ignored if somebody else’s leaders are in power.

African political leaders defined their responsibilities as bringing development to the people, and themselves as the authoritative guardians of the public interest. The idea of development extended to Africa a social democratic conception of the responsibility of the state to promote the public interest. Development rhetoric promoted state centralization, supported by the transfer of external funds to the African state, and an unsustainable expansion of government activities. The failures of the state to realize its promised goals led to the imposition of neo-liberal economic strategies, and also to a counter-discourse of ‘participation’, ‘co-operation’ and ‘empowerment’, elaborated particularly by NGOs as trustees for an alternative development.⁹³

Guarding the Guardians

Politics, said Max Weber, “is a slow and strong boring of hard boards.”⁹⁴ So is the struggle to create and sustain the conditions for democratic politics. Certain of these conditions enable “democratic” decisions by limiting their scope. These decisions also involve creating a framework of broadly accepted constitutional rules and conventions and need to be embedded in everyday political practice if they are not to be employed selectively to promote particular interests. Constitutions are usually the product of compromises, but their outcomes do not generally conform to the expectations of their authors. Those who find or think themselves to be disadvantaged will to change the rules by fair means and foul. The problem is how to reach agreement on the rules in the first place and to persuade people of the importance of adhering to them, even when it is against their interests to do so.

Most African nationalists secured or legitimated their claim to take state power through elections. Elections open to competition among political parties brought new

governments to power or allowed incumbent rulers to legitimate themselves. Local and international observers judge whether elections are “free and fair” or “legitimate.” Such judgments tend to come down to asking whether the winning side would have won anyway and whether the results are politically, and internationally, acceptable, rather than whether the election procedures conformed to relevant laws. If elections are just a way to decide who will exercise power or even to confirm authoritarian rulers in power, they can discredit democratic political practice.

Governments may set up independent institutions to protect rights, to regulate the public activities of private and state institutions, and to referee elections. However, they tend to be taken aback if they act too independently. Electoral commissions may manipulate procedures to determine outcomes. To whom are such independent bodies to be accountable? If only to the government officials who appoint them, they may lose their purpose.

The subordination of policies to the requirements on the international financial agencies closes off key areas of public policy from open debate.⁹⁵ The agencies appear to favor democratic politics only if it enables governments to be more effective in persuading reluctant populations to accept SAPs. When governments can no longer provide the public resources needed and expected by their people, the link between them may be lost. Democratic governments may therefore need to restore the social citizenship that has been lost in recent decades.⁹⁶

Extending the Frontiers of Democratic Space

Emmanuel Akwetey argues that after decades during which violence was used to take power, remove governments and settle political conflicts, Ghanaian political élites began to draw back from the brink. Opposition politicians began to engage the government in discussing electoral and constitutional questions and extended this to

economic and social policies.⁹⁷ The opposition eventually won the 2000 presidential election.

Constitutional debate in Nigeria rarely transcends the partisan. Nigerian politicians took issues to and beyond the brink. All three regions threatened secession between 1953 and the outbreak of civil war in 1967. Northern politicians, who feared that they had lost control of the levers of power, invoked Islamic *shari'a* law in the 1970s and have introduced it in several states since 1999. Nigerian states claim to restrict economic rights to “indigenes,” fragmenting national citizenship into thirty-six units.

Rawls’ conception of an “overlapping consensus” rests on citizens recognizing shared political values and standards of public reason.⁹⁸ People may choose to live their lives and interpret political issues according to more comprehensive doctrines, but they cannot require others to conform to their prescriptions. Citizenship in a liberal and, by extension, democratic society requires secular law and a secular state, respectful of, but not subject to the particular religious beliefs. The imposition of *shari'a* law in Nigeria cannot, in this view, be a proper concern for the state. Nor can the confinement of full citizenship to indigenes of a particular state.

Where are we to find the protectors of our citizenship? Mark Philp looks to “lawyers, professional watchdogs, journalists, commentators, academics and the intelligentsia.”⁹⁹ Jibrin Ibrahim draws attention to the “mass media, trades and professional associations, the legal system and human rights organisations.”¹⁰⁰ Bjorn Beckman observed that, “Nigeria has a rich associational life,” but “little democracy at the level of the state.” There is nothing inherently democratic about associations — nor accountability. It is all a matter of who is accountable to whom, for what and by what means. Beckman focused on the procedures that professional associations and

trade unions negotiate to regulate conflicts and thus “develop a stake in the procedures by which such conflicts are resolved.” In this way they can give rise to “a set of formal and informal rules and practices that define rights and obligations.” Constitutionalism is necessary to “the struggle against the arbitrary exercise of power.”¹⁰¹ Beckman’s argument illustrates how a conception of democratic politics rooted in a commitment to workers’ struggles need not give priority to the substance of class interests over attention to constitutional procedures. Which procedures are appropriate to which context remains open to argument. The politics of deliberation require acceptance of the procedures that make such deliberation possible and the outcomes that emerge from them.

No one conception of democracy can capture the complex of these different elements nor fix the boundaries of democratic politics. In the absence of any overriding criteria as to what makes politics democratic, the foundations of democracy can only be found in continued dialogue and political activism.

NOTES

This essay draws on the lecture “Fragments of Democracy: Nationalism, Development, and the State in Africa” presented in Pretoria on 3 August 2000 in honor of the late Sam Nolutshungu.

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