LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: AN AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of liberal democracy from an African perspective and contends that although liberal democracy appears to have produced positive socio-economic and political development, in Africa the theory is still received with mixed reactions since a lot of countries remain stagnate in terms of development. The article also charges that most of the African leaders have stifled all efforts of democratization and development because of their greed which compromises the welfare of the civil society. The essay finally argues that in order for democracy and development to become a reality in Africa, the elites should stop manipulating the state resources for their benefit but rather focus on service delivery as well as the empowerment of both genders. The African electorates should rebuke patronage politics, and explore new avenues that could bring about sound socio-economic and political changes.

Keywords: Liberal democracy, development, elections, patronage

INTRODUCTION

This essay addresses the concept of liberal democracy from an African perspective and outlines that although liberal democracy has proved to be a successful political theory in the West; in Africa it is still receiving mixed reactions. The paper attempts to define liberal democracy and goes on to look at the nature or functions of liberal democracy in Africa. It also draws a link between liberal democratic operations and political instability in Africa. The paper looks at the relationship between liberal democracy, gender and development from an African perspective. Finally, it argues that in order for liberal democracy to be seen to be productive within an African context, the leaders should start prioritizing the welfare of the civil society rather promoting material gains and selfish interests at the expense of the masses. Within its fundamental principles, democracy works when the people (both the majority and the minority) are simultaneously at the center of its operation.

After the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, liberal democracy was seen as the real "messiah" for a new socio-economic and political order in the world. However, the continuing absence of democratic governance in some of the African states today is truly a striking anomaly. Africa, just like other world regions, caught the cold of this new political order which basically advocated the globalization of democracy. To date, this form of democracy is seen to have bred more harm than good in the development of the Global-South and democracy in general is still in deficit let alone pronounced socio-economic and political development. Ake (1996) contends that liberal democracy does not regard development of the people as a major priority. He advances that through liberal democracy, the elite get richer whiles the poor remain mourning forever for the improvement of their socio-economic and political conditions. In fact, Ake makes a case that, it is not that development has failed in Africa; it just was never part of the plan and in a sense it has not really started. Hipler (1995) on the other hand observes that the West does promote democracy in the Third World although it does in specific ways which promotes and serves its own interest.

DEFINITION OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Lynn (1999) shares that democracy presupposes the existence of three types of rights, political, economic and social: the right to participate in the political process; to enjoy a fair distribution of resources; and to be free from oppression (p.129). In this case we begin to see the link between democracy being understood in terms of it being a political system, as well as it being linked to the capitalist economic system, whereby the participation of the people is also tied to having the freedom to participate in the enjoyment of those material benefits that accompany economic development

(Lynn, 1999). Making reference to MacPherson (1973), Lyn further charges that liberal democracy which is driven by the capitalist economic system, tends to have problems since capitalism tends to simultaneously undermine democracy because it compels most people to transfer their natural powers of self-development to economic 'overloads' who control capital and other resources. On the other hand, Held (2006) observes that liberalism is associated with the doctrine that within the state, individuals should be free to pursue their socio-economic and political preferences.

According to Turner (2003), one problem of liberalism or liberal democracy is that often its definition is surrounded by a lot of diverse and divergent opinions. Turner asserts that for us to be able to define or understand liberal democracy, we firstly need to explore the relationship between liberalism and democracy. Within this relationship, the common factors are those of public discussion and tolerance of even those ideas we hate or disagree with. Turner (2003:9) says Liberal democracy has to do with the idea of having a 'government through discussion,' whereby there is a free exchange of ideas indirectly or directly produced by public opinion- by controlling the means of production of public opinion. So in this case, public opinion becomes the basis of political action through representation.

Leaders are elected through free and fair elections which nurture and appreciate political pluralism which is often reflected by having multiple political bodies or parties. Liberal democracy operates through a liberal democratic constitution which guides the state on how to govern as well as providing a system for checks and balances. It is a form of representative democracy whereby the elected officials can make decisions on behalf of the masses and those decisions being guided and governed by the constitution which ascertains that civil liberties and rights are not trampled upon.

It therefore could be argued that the neo-patrimonial states of the postcolonial Africa are hostile to the entire process of democratization and development of the African people. Nzongola-Ntalaja and Lee (1998) argue that African democracy has adversely affected the social and economic fabric of the people and has also exacerbated the political tensions and conflicts in African countries at the expense of development. Generally, most of the African states cherish the new political reforms but the sad part of the story is that many African countries are plagued in the political turbulence that makes it impossible to have successful governments that foster development. Coups, riots, wars, to state just a few, have become the order of the day in many Africa countries; thus making development a total nightmare. On the basis of the above, the 'imported' African liberal democracy has failed or continues to impede development contrary to the expectations of the civil society. National constitutions have been violated in the past and continue to be violated by the predatory elites at the expense of socio-economic and political progress.

THE NATURE OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

The yardstick currently used to measure democracy in Africa is the presence of multi-parties and the continuous conduct of elections. If a country has several political parties contesting for the governance of the country, the national government can declare that democracy is reigning regardless of whether the "promises and lies of elections" are fulfilled to meet the expectations of the electorates. The conducting of the so-called "free and fair elections" in Africa is often seen as a step that gives birth to a democratic society. Surprisingly, most of these elections are not free and fair as is supposed to be case. Is it not an amazing 'abuse of democracy' that the recently rigged elections in Zimbabwe were declared free and fair despite the fact that just before the elections, the political atmosphere in Zimbabwe was so volatile to the extent that the leader of the opposition, Morgan Tsvangirai had to seek political asylum in South Africa? That being as it may, some election observers and news agencies declared the elections "free and fair." This paints a bad image for the liberal democratic political theory.

Traditionally, most of the opposition parties in Africa end up being compelled to challenge the outcomes of the elections and this eventually leads to further development of deadly political differences which ultimately culminate to armed conflict. Ethnic and religious differences in most African countries perpetuates political instability that emerges when opposition party leaders challenge the outcomes of elections as it happened in the case of Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria, of late Zambia, the list is long. Although liberal democracy appears to have given hope as an alternative form of government, the results of its successes in Africa are yet to be seen in most of the states.

Sachikonye (1995) charges that liberal democracy in Africa has resulted in many autocratic regimes which resist and frustrate mass demands for the democratic change by manipulating the political system through the electoral process so as to block the ascendance of popular opposition forces. Given this argument, it could be outlined that elections are used as a tool through which unjust governments resume office regardless of whether the civil society regard the elections as free and fair or not. It is for this reason that African governments still have a long way to go prior to having proper democratic transitions. The relationship between the civil society and the so-called government of the day remains sour in most instances.

For instance, Angola, DRC, Zimbabwe, Somalia, Rwanda, Sudan, amongst many, are typical sad stories of democracies which have failed to operate by having the welfare of the civil society at heart. These countries have been war zones which glorify blood flow more than the freedoms and rights of the masses. It therefore comes as no surprise that social movements such as labor organizations, cooperatives, students and women movements, youth as well as churches, have resorted to radical approaches which challenge governments to deliver socio-economic and political services to the people. In addition, trade unions such as Congress of South African Trade Unions, COSATU, in South Africa and Ghana Trade Union Congress, amongst others continue to challenge governments on pertinent bread and butter issues affecting the civil society.

The shortcomings of African liberal democracy are embraced in the narrow and myopic definition of democracy which confines itself to multipartism and the periodic holding of elections, administered and monitored by bizarre constitutions which claim to be upholding the rule of law. Liberal democracy's scope of operation reflects a lot of social injustice to the masses and those who survive or enjoy the fruits of the government are the few elites who always ascertain that popular participation in the political and economic spheres is kept very minimal and enjoyed by only those who are the cog wheels of the illegitimate and corrupt governments.

Solomon and Liebenberg (2000) assert that the liberal democratic state in Africa has led to unspeakable corruption and embezzlement, tyranny and dictatorship, civil war and deadly conflict. In view of this criticism, it could be relayed confidently that with a few exceptions, the so-called democracy we see in Africa has bred more "thugs, thieves and warmongers" rather than true representative leaders of the people. African liberal democracy reflects a chain of "mischievous and monster acts" by those in power to better their own economic, social and political positions with little concern for the citizens. Solomon and Liebenberg (2000:14) further draw our attention to the fact that wars in Nigeria, Angola, Mozambique, Chad, Somalia, Liberia and DRC are true indications of the fact that liberal democracy is failing to bring positive developments to the continent.

The other terrifying phenomenon that is part of the package of liberal democracy is mass ethnic cleansing such as the one that took place in Rwanda and led to enormous human sufferings. The intolerance that most of the African governments have towards opposition parties is a clear indication that African democracy has no respect for personal freedoms and that it continues to suppress human rights. So the argument here is that African technocratic elites have declared war on one another and accumulated wealth all in the name of liberal democratic functions. The dismal performance of most of the African leaders is a reflection of the fact that democracy in Africa is still a nightmare. Development in this case cannot be expected to assume a pronounced direction if democracy is still in limbo. Well, there could be a counter argument that democracy is not a precondition for development and or vice-versa but sound as the argument might be, it can be tackled at a different platform. The state is yet to provide social security and better the standards of living for the ordinary citizens.

Saul (2001) mentions that it will take long before development can take shape in Africa because the ruling classes are in the habit of sidelining public resources for their own private use (www.fnf.org.za). This personal enrichment affects development gravely in that the resources that could be channeled towards helping many people are enjoyed by the chosen few. Mobuto SeseSeko stands as a good example of typical African kleptocracy that hampers development and of late Robert Mugabe has joined the train of African dictators who want to hang on to power regardless of the deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions of their countries. Mobuto died richer than his own country whiles the citizens could not even afford a loaf of bread. The case of Zaire during

Mobutu's reign is still a living testimony even today of the fake democracy we see in the African continent instead of a true democracy whose orientation is to improve the socio-economic and political conditions of the led.

Nepotism and patronage have become cancerous within Africa's democracy. In theory, liberal democratic philosophy maintains that its focus point is to better the living conditions of the people, but what exists in practice is the contrary. Saul (2001) concludes his argument by stating that given such circumstances, one does not need to be a prophet to be able to predict that the path leading to "genuine" democracy in African is long and thorny if ever the destination is to be reached.

Sachikonye (1995:5) further exposes the weakness of liberal democracy by stating that liberal democracy is a western ideology whose goal is to promote capitalism in Africa. He indicates that structural adjustment programs, which are products of liberal democracy, have negatively affected social services such as labor conditions, health, education and the privatization of public enterprise and the devaluation of currencies have resulted in embarrassing and troubling economic conditions. This is an indication that African governments are dancing to the tunes of foreign donors under the umbrella of capitalism at the expense of the electorates. What all these show is that liberal democracy is clearly not thriving and it is by no means clear whether we should be celebrating the triumph of democracy or lamenting its demise (Ake 1996:3).

Democratization in Africa will only become a reality if the African leaders can start thinking in terms of delivering the necessary goods and services to the people. The capitalist and imperialist ideals, which are cherished by liberal democracy in Africa, will continue to be a blow to the development of the continent. The economic liberalization that is being cherished by most of the Africa states in the age of globalization is going to widen the gap between the *haves* and *have nots* which will further hamper development. Today most of the African states have remained paupers despite the fact that they remain loyal to economic liberalization and all other dictates of globalization which uses liberal democracy as a jump-starting condition. A whole century of evidence corroborates that liberal democracy has not been incompatible with social and economic inequality, with anti-democratic rule, with physical oppression, with partisan distribution of resources and systemic corruption (Sankatsing 2004).

AFRICA'S LIBERAL DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY

It is a painful reality that during the colonial era, the entire African continent was struggling for liberation and even today many African countries are still calling for liberation. Yesterday the cry was about liberation from the colonizer-today the cry is about liberation from the "African brother." One therefore would wonder when the continent is going to start talking about development if so much time is invested on the struggle for liberation that apparently would take some divine intervention before it can become a reality. Honestly, does God need to fall from heaven in order for African people to receive their independence?

Turok (1987) partly provides an answer to the above by revealing that independence and liberation in Africa means raising the flag and singing a national anthem and then later going back to the bush. There is some truth in Turok's assertion in that for decades the Great Lakes in Central Africa has been submerged in a spiral of ethnic conflict. We have seen the same in Kenya of late. Every effort to try to resolve disputes appears to have led to the emergence of new conflicts. This conflict therefore affects development in that there is no way in which productive economic and social activities can be conducted if the country is at war.

In August 1998, war broke-out in the DRC between the former Kabila's government and the opposition rebel movements. These conflicts took shape because liberal democracy has failed to deliver the promised services to the masses. Baregu (1999) indicates that former president Kabila was at the heart of the conflict in his country since he facilitated the mutilations of the minority of *Banyamulenga* people within his state. It therefore goes without saying that the leaders in African states are mostly biased and lack vision in their ways of dealing with the civil society to the extent that they generate and support ethnic conflicts in order to cling to their power.

As if not enough, on the eve of Christmas in 1989, a group if dissidents of Charles Taylor invaded Liberia with the intention of unseating the then government of President Samuel Kanyon Doe who also had seized power through evil bloody tactics in 1980. Taylor succeeded in his coup attempt and eventually had his National Patriotic Front Liberia (NPFL) rebel occupying a good portion of Liberia. During this conflict, the civilians were massacred in large numbers and development of the country got to a standstill. The provision of basic necessities under Taylor's regime became a difficult if not an impossible exercise. The case of Taylor is just an example and to some degree a seed of some justification of the fact that most of the African governments make development a secondary issue whilst conflicts and war become more of a primary matter. In instances where you have the so-called stable and successful governments, the traditional norm under those governments is that corruption, fraud and total anarchy become part of the composition of the marrow of the government. This state of affairs is troubling and deserves an immediate panacea. The body of social sciences and contemporary world politics should find a remedy for this scenario.

Sandbrook (2000) also positively contributes to our debate by mentioning that in Kenya, ethnic conflicts occurred in 1997 as supporters of the then President Moi sought to "cleanse" the province of migrant opposition supporters prior to the elections. Moi always claimed that his government was a shining example of African democracy and maintained the ideal that multiparty elections in Kenya would aggravate ethnic animosities and temper with the country's democracy. Moi intimidated the opposition parties and was forever ready to counter-attack the demands for electoral reform with violence. Such actions indicate beyond any scope of doubt that Africa liberal democracy does not recognize the civil society and other pertinent organizations and movements as key actors in the governing of the state. The current post election political crisis and tension in Kenya which took course in 2007, is a testimony about the fragile nature and complexity of Africa's liberal democracy. Although Moi is gone in the case of Kenya, the bottom line issue is that the legacy of his leadership style is alive given the current political wrangling. Abuses of power, cheating during elections and the general spirit of conspiracy have compromised development and social justice in many African states.

It is probably an open secret that most African states are worse off today than they were with reference to the health and nutrition, education, infrastructures and above all, governance. We have not seen much development in most of the countries despite the fact that the corrupt governments of the day claim that a lot has been achieved. Liberal democracy legalizes governments and in turn the leaders fail dramatically to address the needs of the electorates. Ake (1996) argues that political conditions in Africa are the major obstacles to development and that development is not regarded as a matter of priority. Instead the political leaders use state power for the accumulation of resources, a spirit that emerges from individualism coupled with systemic corruption and marginalization of the masses.

DEMOCRACY AND GENDER VERSUS DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

After resuming power, many leaders resort to finding survival means within the system by ascertaining that they maintain their power at the same time making sure that their economic muscles grow. As earlier stated, many Africa governments belief that mass political participation will be detrimental to social savings and capital accumulation as well as to development. Therefore, what we experience today in Africa is the marginalization of the electorates especially women in the process of governance and in almost all development efforts. For development to take course in Africa; there is need for the government to value the input of the civil society regardless of gender or political affiliation. Women are victims of African liberal democracy and it is for this reason that many of them are involved in non-governmental organizations as an empowerment tool that calls for a place in the entire democratization and development initiatives. Their voices need to be heard in the day-to-day running of the state. However, it is saddening to note that across the entire African continent, women's representation in parliament and even in cabinet leaves much to be desired even within the so-called successful democracies such as Botswana. Any form of development that sidelines women is skewed. Development, democracy and equal representation go hand in hand (Sankatsing 2004).

Nzongola-Ntalaja and Lee (1998) concur with this assertion when stating that for decades Botswana's democracy did not recognize women as equals in the government and even the constitution was biased. They argue that women's struggles for equality in Botswana in the 1990s took a more overtly

political stance in demanding representation and political space in decision-making structures of the government and other political structures (p.25). It is maintained that Botswana's women's role in government and development is restricted by certain powerful conventions in the form of customs, traditions, laws and political practices which dissolve *Batswana* women to a position where they become subordinates to men who limit their capability to make sound decisions about their lives and welfare.

To prove the weakness of Botswana's democracy towards women in politics, in the early 1980s a women lawyer Justice Unity Dow, who later became a High Court Judge and retired early 2009, challenged the Botswana constitution in court over the fact that it denied women married to foreign men the right to pass their citizenship to their children. Dow won the case against the government and for the first time in history, the international arena became aware of the fact that Botswana's "shining example of a successful liberal democracy" was not immune to discrimination and social injustices against women, which are of course rampant among many African states. As a result of this case, many laws affecting women in the constitution were amended. For instance, women started enjoying the freedom for applying for bank loans independently without having the husbands having to authorize or endorse the loan. It could therefore be posed that the reason why Botswana is painted with colors of a shining example of a democracy in Africa is because to some extent the civil liberties are respected compared to other African states. However, such a development came to picture after a long struggle; hence Botswana's democracy is not immune to the leadership ills that seem to be engulfing the entire African continent.

It is not enough to judge Botswana's success in democracy and development on the basis of "free and fair elections," GDP and the country's per capita income. Gender issues are as well crucial in any democracy. African leaders cannot truly talk of development if the societal contribution of women is marginalized on the basis of gender affiliation. Both men and women are needed in the shaping of a successful liberal democratic path.

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A NECESSITY IN A DEMOCRACY

Aubrey (1997) charges that women are totally marginalized in the public life of politics in postcolonial Africa despite the fact that they are mostly involved in the affairs of the NGOs. The case that Aubrey is making is based on Ghana's 31st December Women's Movement (DWM) and Kenya's *MaendeleoYaWanawake* Organization (MYWO). Aubrey makes a case that the reason why women are involved in these organizations is not because they are empowered but rather they are kept in these organizations so that they have something to do in order to remain silent within the political spheres. She advances that the fact that NGOs are not autonomous from the state, is a reflection that women will still remain subjects to the state which will make it difficult for their voices to be heard. In this case the validity and legitimacy of liberal democracy becomes debatable.

The African heads of states have created or inherited the "First Lady" position as a secret weapon of their gender biases in the political field. The NGOs unfortunately are organizations whose sole goal is to help the government maintain power especially those led by the First Ladies or those run by women who are in good books with the leaders. Ambrose (1995: 99) mentions that as Africa moves towards democratization, human rights NGOs will have to assume a greater role so as to help transform oppressive structures. NGOs in African democracies can be very productive in the process of development in that they can help the government implement policies that are geared towards benefiting the civil society. Narrowing the duties of First Ladies to litter picking and always appearing in public side-by-side with the spouse is not empowering enough. We need to see their involvement in critical decision-making, someone else can take care of the litter picking exercise.

Decentralization of power within the Africa political system can add flavor to development in African democracy. However, if the NGOs will remain totally affiliated to the authoritarian and corrupt states, they will never do democracy and development any good since they will be seen to be promoting and implementing the same oppressive policies from the government. Kasfir (1998: 85) however, cautions that the NGOs and women in general are faced with a problem citing that in Uganda some women have found out that when they fight for the democratization of the public sphere, to accommodate women, they are often confronted with violence and uncivil means to maintain the status quo which

are motivated and perpetrated by the government. The African governments ought to widen the political space and embrace the civil society so as to break the gender biased legacies that cripple development. Women are a formidable force that can play a fundamental role in African governments.

CONCLUSION

The elites should stop hijacking the state for their benefits. A true democracy for development in Africa will remain an unsolved mystery unless the African leaders and the implementers of the liberal democracy phenomenon become socially conscious about the harm and pain they cause to the civil society. The elites and the bourgeoisie continue formulating policies and rules whose sole goal is to satisfy their economic thirst at the expense of human rights and freedoms. Maundeni (2010) charges that the political culture of most of the enfeebled African leaders makes it difficult to democratize political parties and so as to also promote internal democracy and political tolerance. It is time that we should see some equilibrium in politics that is not coupled with patriarchal abuses. The African states should cease from dehumanizing women and instead they should give them some panorama to participate in the governing of the states without giving them inhumane labels or making them subjects of men.

It is totally a myopic and ill informed philosophical advancement to label the nation-states as democratic on the basis of the fact that they have held elections regularly. Elections on their own cannot be the yardstick for measuring development as advocated by the liberal democratic aspirations. As indicated earlier, Zimbabwe for instance, has held several skewed elections since independence and more often the government of Mugabe would declare the elections "free and fair" despite the civil society and international community's dissatisfaction. Today the government of Zimbabwe is in total shambles and just like any other mindless autocratic leader, Mugabe still believes that his leadership style is purely democratic and that it can foster and revive the appalling socio-economic and political grave in Zimbabwe. The writing is on the wall as of today that the Zimbabwean economy has rolled into trenches and the people of Zimbabwe are caught in the middle of an economic hurricane.

All in all, it is time that the "hens should begin to crow" so as to close the gap of political, economic and social injustice that is so evident within the democratization process in Africa. The civil society's momentum and transformational vision should be allowed to take course in order for democracy and development to reign. The African electorates should rebuke patronage politics, and explore new avenues that could bring about sound socio-economic and political changes. To date, liberal democracy in Africa has done very little in its efforts to address development issues within the continent. The development marathon still has extra miles to go; a lot of hurdles are in place especially since corruption and fraud seem to be the order of the day in many governments.

On the basis on the above, given the current state of socio-economic and political affairs, rationally it holds water to advance the argument that liberal democracy has impeded development in Africa rather than nurturing it. Measuring development in terms of the "free and fair" national elections held in a country, paints a faulty image regarding what democracy is and or what it truly should be. Our African democracy needs strangers and the strangers are those who can logically critique it for the better. May be one day we will see a spark of light at the end of the socio-economic and political tunnel currently bedeviling Africa. It is high time that freedom should begin to ring around all the corners of the oppressed African people. Sankatsing (2004:24) sums this discussion well by asserting that power, not by bullet, ballot or wallet, but by representation that mobilizes the strategic forces of society, as agents of history, is the only feasible response to social in contemporary world, in order to rescue democracy, trigger development and bring about harmony. Definitely liberal democracy should harness harmony amongst citizens in a state regardless of their socio-economic and political position.

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