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The unique case of African democracy

CLAUDE AKE

Claude Ake considers the unique features of African democracy. He explains why its development must stem from the ordinary people of Africa and from their concept of participation.

Africa's long neglected democracy movement is now enjoying unprecedented support at home and abroad. But it does so amid considerable confusion about what the movement is and what it portends to be. This confusion is not unrelated to its complex nature. The movement has many components: out of power politicians for whom democratization is less a commitment than a strategy for power; ethnic, national and communal groups who are obliged to wage struggles for democratic incorporation because a manipulative leadership has seized state power in the name of an ethnic or national group; ordinary people who are calling for a second independence having concluded that the politics of the present leadership, far from offering any prospect of relief from underdevelopment, has deepened it immensely; international human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which are only just beginning to perceive the relation between human rights and democracy; international financial institutions, especially the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, for whom democracy provides the political requirements for the operation of market forces; and Western governments who support democracy in Africa as the process through which the universalizing of the Western model of society can take place.

Amid this confusion it is difficult to discern what kind of democracy is emerging in Africa and what unique features will give it depth and sustainability in African conditions. This paper addresses those questions. A useful way of approach is to begin by ascertaining whose democratic participation is at issue—an obvious but important point, the significance of which is often elusive. Clearly, it is not that of World Bank officials, Western NGOs or for that matter, the African elite. But it is that of a society which is still pre-industrial and communal and whose cultural idiom is radically different. This is a society whose members are barely surviving on informal sector activities

and subsistence farming. Very little attention is given to these realities that will ultimately determine the possibility of democracy in Africa.

The disappointment of independence

Although the elite have an exceptionally high profile in the African democracy movement, and largely dominate its leadership, they do not constitute its social base. Popular explanations of the provenance of the movement that stress the demonstration effect of the revolutionary liberalization of Eastern Europe, and pressures from the West including political conditionality and the liberalizing dynamics of structural adjustment, are misleading.

The foundation upon which Africa's democracy movement is based is the bitter disappointment of independence and post-independence plans—the development project being a prime example. Poor leadership and structural constraints have turned the high expectations of the independence movement into painful disappointment, forcing many African leaders to rely more on coercion which has deepened their alienation. But the coercion and alienation have worsened the prospects of development, leading to yet more alienation and coercion. The tragic consequences of this vicious circle are all too clear in contemporary Africa: with minor exceptions, physical infrastructures as well as social infrastructures have collapsed, economies are mired in chronic crisis, poverty has greatly intensified and the people are in revolt.

Throughout Africa ordinary people are demanding a second independence, this time from the indigenous leadership whose economic mismanagement, together with brutal repression, have made mere survival all but impossible. There is an increased awareness among Africans that the monopoly of power enjoyed by this failed leadership has to be broken in order that power can be transferred to the people who have little to lose and much to gain. That is why demonstrations for democratization persist in spite of repression, and why radical lawyers and previously isolated civil rights activists have found a growing and reliable political base. The democracy movement in Africa is a powerful, objective, historical force in that it expresses the desire of ordinary people to gain power and material improvement.

Having identified the social base of the democracy movement in Africa, its properties, which remain more potential than actual, are still difficult to define. At the moment the movement understands democracy in the most conventional sense of multi-party electoral competition, a perception which reflects its bourgeois leadership and international support. In the case of many African leaders of the movement, democracy is largely a strategy for power, not a vehicle for popular empowerment. The international support for democracy from the West rides on the universalization of the Western model of society. In this context customizing democracy to African conditions is not entirely desirable because it might detract from the universalism of the Western model. In the face of these powerful forces it will be difficult for the movement in Africa to avoid settling for the line of least resistance, that is, for orthodox liberal democracy.

The economic component

In order for African democracy to be relevant and sustainable it will have to be radically different from liberal democracy. For one thing, it will have to de-emphasize abstract political rights and stress concrete economic rights, because the demand for democracy in Africa draws much of its impetus from the prevailing economic conditions within. It is not surprising, for example, that in Zaïre, Cameroon, Benin, Togo, Niger, Gabon and Congo sovereign national conferences were held, or strongly demanded, at times when the economy had virtually collapsed or when economic austerity was exceptionally harsh.

Ordinary Africans do not separate political democracy from economic democracy or for that matter from economic well-being. They see their political empowerment, through democratization, as an essential part of the process of getting the economic agenda right at last and ensuring that the development project is managed better and its rewards more evenly distributed. This is made evident in the demands and debates at national conferences.

The emerging political theory of the democracy movement in Africa sees the economic regression of the continent as the other side of political regression. It recognizes that the cause of development is better served by a democratic approach that engages the energy and commitment of the people who alone can make development possible and sustainable. Thus, the African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation,¹ a product of the 1990 Arusha conference of over 500 African groups (mainly grass roots organizations together with some international agencies and governments) argued that the absence of democracy is a major cause of chronic underdevelopment in Africa:

We affirm that nations cannot be built without popular support and full participation of the people, nor can the economic crisis be resolved and the human and economic conditions improved without the full and effective contribution, creativity and popular enthusiasm of the vast majority of the people. After all, it is to the people that the very benefits of development should and must accrue.

The Charter is clear that Africans are seeking democracy not only as a condition of survival, but also from the realization that they must fend for themselves or perish. Because development must now be self-reliant at both the national and grass roots level, it has also to be based on political democracy:

Moreover, given the current world political and economic situation, Africa is becoming further marginalized in world affairs both geopolitically and economically. African countries have to realize that more than ever before their greatest resource is their people. It is through their active and full participation in the political and economic life of their countries that Africa can surmount the difficulties that lie ahead.

The linking of political democracy to economic development, is, perhaps surprisingly, the prevailing orthodoxy. United Nations documents on Africa,

¹ African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation (Arusha, 1990), United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, E/ECA/CM, 16/11.

for example the *United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development* (UNPAAERD, 1986–90), increasingly adopt this view. The address of the UN Secretary-General to the 1990 Arusha conference argued that there was an inescapable link between economic recovery in Africa and political participation. The World Bank too is edging towards this view.

At the Bretton Woods Committee Conference on Africa's Finance and Development Crisis in Washington, April 1990, Mr Barber Conable (President of the World Bank 1986–91), listed better governance as a primary requirement of economic recovery in Africa, and surprisingly the Organization of African Unity espouses this view. The 26th summit of the OAU, in Addis Ababa in July 1990, issued a declaration that acknowledged that a political environment which guarantees human rights and the rule of law would be more conducive to accountability, and that 'popular based political processes would ensure the involvement of all' in development efforts.

There are indications that the desire for material improvement is fuelling democratization in Africa. This has far-reaching implications. First, it means that the feasibility of democratization will depend partly on the correlation of this process with better economic prospects. Second, the critical importance of the economic factor in the African democracy movement will mean a change of emphasis from abstract legal and political rights to social and economic rights: from laissez-faire and the tolerance of economic inequality to the acceptance of considerable economic intervention in the market place in the interests of growth and a redistribution of economic wealth.

African democracy cannot afford to go down a different path because it must reflect the vital interests of its social base. At the same time, by expressing the desire for new structures, it is in conflict with the values and vested interests of its powerful sponsors—the African elite, Western nations and international development agencies. The African elite do not want this type of democracy because they are mainly interested in democracy as a means to power. They are nervous about the egalitarian implications of increased social and economic rights that will shift resources to social services, leading to a rise in the living standards for the vast majority of the people.

As far as the international community is concerned, this thrust will seem like the degeneration of democracy into socialism. In the prevailing triumphalism of the West and its worship of the market economy, it is highly unlikely that African democracy will be allowed to develop in its own unique way. It is far more likely that any deviation from orthodox liberal democracy, any distrust of the market, will invoke retribution.

Socio-cultural realities

African democracy is unique in that it reflects the socio-cultural realities of Africa. Liberal democracy which pretends to universalism is historically specific. It is a child of industrial civilization, a product of a socially atomized society where production and exchange are already commodified, a society

which is essentially a market. It is the product of a society in which interests are so particularized that the very notion of common interest becomes problematic, hence the imperative of democracy.

Contemporary Africa remains a far cry from this. It is still predominantly pre-capitalist and pre-industrial. Primordial loyalties and pre-capitalist social structures remain strong. Apart from the urban enclaves, African society is still essentially constituted as mechanical solidarity. Africa is still a communal society, and it is this communalism which defines the peoples' perception of self-interest, their freedom and their location in the social whole.

In this context, the familiar political assumptions and political arrangements of liberal democracy make little sense in Africa. Liberal democracy assumes individualism, but there is little individualism in Africa: it assumes the abstract universalism of legal subjects, but in Africa that would apply only in the urban environment; the political parties of liberal democracy do not make sense in societies where associational life is rudimentary and interest groups remain essentially primary groups. It is questionable to assume that political parties are the appropriate mechanism for political competition under such conditions. Single member constituencies are hardly suitable for societies that are still federations of ethnic groups and nationalities.

Liberal democracy offers a form of political participation which is markedly different from and arguably inferior to the African concept of participation. For the African, especially the rural dweller, participation is linked to communality. Africans do not generally see themselves as self-regarding atomized beings in essentially competitive and potentially conflicting interaction with others. Rather, their consciousness is directed towards belonging to an organic whole. The point is to find one's station and duty in life, not to assert one's interests and claim rights over others. People participate not because they are individuals whose interests are different and need to be asserted, but because they are part of an interconnected whole. Participation rests not on the assumption of individualism and conflicting interests, but on the social nature of human beings. Related to this, the African concept of participation is as much a matter of taking part as of sharing the rewards and burdens of community membership. It does not simply enjoin abstract rights, but secures concrete benefits. In addition, in the traditional African sense, participation is quite unlike the Western notion of the occasional opportunity to choose, affirm or dissent. It is rather the active involvement in a process, that of setting goals and making decisions. More often than not, it is the involvement in the process rather than the acceptability of the end decision, which satisfies the need to participate.

Community politics

This notion of the relation between the individual and the collective reflects the communal character of African society. The enduring strength of communality and primary group loyalty is evident in the way ethnic or voluntary associations have increased in contemporary Africa. These associations arose in

the colonial era as a defence against the regimes and the absence of social welfare systems. They provided a range of services for the unemployed, the bereaved and the destitute, while often providing scholarships and resources for those wanting to break into the informal sector. In time, their concerns extended to rural development, including the provision of roads, civic centres, hospitals, cattle dips, craft centres and churches. They were instrumental in mobilizing rural people into effective pressure groups capable of obtaining government aid and for the defence of collective interests.

The strength of primary loyalties, especially those with an ethnic base, is due as much to their cultural significance as to their practical utility. More often than not ethnic and national groups are the locus of the individual's primary loyalty. They have largely displaced the state, which is often seen as contested terrain on which contending primary groups fight for the appropriation of what is supposed to be the common wealth.

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Democracy has to be recreated in the context of the given realities and in political arrangements which fit the cultural context, but without sacrificing its values and inherent principles. In Africa this fit is likely to entail, among other things, a consocietal arrangement—the use of ethnic groups, nationalities and communities as the constituencies for representation. This would be a highly decentralized system of government with equal emphasis on individual and communal rights.

A unique African democracy is not something that will emerge from a rational blueprint: it will emerge from practical experience and improvisation in the course of a hard struggle. The process towards democracy must be shaped by the singular reality that those whose democratic participation is at issue are the ordinary people of Africa—many are illiterate, and almost all are poor, rural dwellers in an essentially pre-industrial and communal society. So long as this fact is kept steadfastly in focus, democracy will evolve in ways that will enhance its meaning and give it depth and sustainability. But it will be quite different from the contemporary version of liberal democracy, indeed, different enough to elicit suspicion and even hostility from the international community that currently supports African democratization. If, however, African democracy follows the line of least resistance to Western liberalism, it will achieve only the democracy of alienation.