

Democracy in Africa: Past, Present and Future

Andebrhan Welde Giorgis

**Thank you, Chair,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

I am honoured to speak on *Democracy in Africa* here, at the Development Policy Centre (DPC) of the Crawford School of Public Policy of the Australian National University (ANU). I am grateful to Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC, Chancellor of the ANU, my former boss at ICG, for this honour. I also thank Professor Stephen Howes, the Director of the DPC, for hosting this event.

The topic, *Democracy in Africa: Past, Present and Future*, is very broad and difficult to address with justice in such a short lecture. To convey a general outline of democracy, or rather the lack of it, in post-colonial Africa, I will try to present (1) a brief overview of the impact of European intervention in Africa; (2) the struggle of the African peoples for self-determination; (3) the challenges of democracy; and (4) the prospects for democratic governance.

1. Impact of European Intervention

Africa is the original home of *Homo sapiens*, or the “birthplace of mankind”. This makes it the oldest inhabited continent, from which humanity spread the world over. Africa is also the cradle of civilisation. It has a rich history, diverse cultures and abundant natural resources.

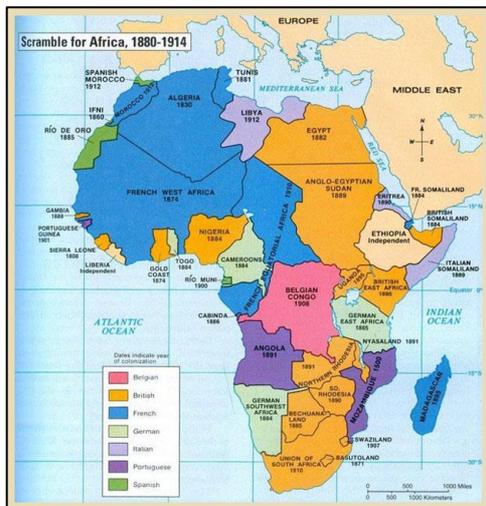
For millennia, Africa and Europe have been in constant contact. The record shows manifold interaction since the times of ancient Egypt, Carthage, Axum, Greece and Rome. However, the Afro-European relationship has not always been positive. It had its dark side in the *slave trade*, the *colonial project* and the *Cold War*, with devastating effects on the development of Africa and the evolution of African society. Let me briefly highlight these historical features to set the context for our discussion today.

1.1 Slavery: The slave trade uprooted 18.3 million Africans: 17.5 million were shipped out of Africa and 820,000 died awaiting shipment in African ports. Between 1450 and 1900, 11.2

million African slaves were sent via the transatlantic route to the New World and 50,000 to Europe and the Atlantic Islands.

Slavery deracinated, brutalised and dehumanised millions of Africans, disrupted the fabric of many an African society and ruined its economy. The surplus created by the slave trade and the use of slave labour in the New World represented Africa's loss and Europe's gain. Adding insult to injury, the descendants of African slaves, despite their considerable contribution to the development of Europe and the Americas, continue to endure pervasive racial discrimination. The catastrophe of slavery was followed by the calamity of colonialism.

1.2 Colonialism: The colonial system, sanctioned by the Berlin Conference (1884-85), carved Africa into colonies, interrupted its indigenous processes and gave it its present geopolitical formation. Driven by nascent Europe's rising demand for labour, raw materials, minerals and markets, the Berlin Conference laid the groundwork for European conquest and partition of Africa. As the late Basil Davidson, the renowned British Africa historian, put it: "Europe invaded Africa, took possession of Africa, and divided Africa into colonies of Europe."



Map 1: Colonial Partition of Africa

Seven European powers partitioned, carved up and forged the modern nation states of Africa. The territorial frontiers, drawn without regard to the interests of the affected populations, often artificially split same communities into two or three different colonial systems. During the European scramble for Africa, Africans lacked the organisation, technology, and cohesion necessary to resist aggression.

The creation of a centralised administrative system and a modern economic sector enabled Europe's political domination and economic plunder of Africa. European conquest created the colonial state as an apparatus to pacify local resistance, subjugate the 'natives', and extract surplus primarily for the benefit of colonial settlers and the colonial metropolis.

The colonial powers combined European technology, knowhow and organisation with African labour and natural resources to produce wealth 'on-site' and transfer it to Europe through exportation. Furthermore, the *colonial project* has exerted an enduring impact on the making of the present African State. Imperial Europe laid the foundation of the fragmentation and

disunity of Africa. As the former colonies evolved into independent states, their artificial boundaries and resultant territorial structures became crucial factors posing serious challenges to peace, security and sustainable development in the continent.

1.3 The Cold War: The Cold War, fed by East-West rivalry, turned Africa into a battlefield of proxy warfare, both at the interstate and intrastate levels. Many postcolonial African regimes, dubbed *neocolonial*, served as willing pawns in the East-West conflict to the detriment of real self-determination, democratic development and functional governance. Wars and conflicts, and the attendant waste, destabilisation and insecurity, hampered the political, economic and social development of Africa and degraded the human condition of Africans.

The combined effect of the slave trade, the colonial project and the Cold War retarded and distorted the autonomous development of Africa for five and half centuries. This troubled history aside, a paradigm shift is underway in Europe-Africa relations. There is political will and earnest effort to replace the old relations of dominance and dependence with a new strategic partnership and cooperation in the service of mutual and global interests.

The European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU) today are engaged in eight (8) thematic partnerships, namely, (1) *Peace and Security*; (2) *Democratic Governance and Human Rights*; (3) *Trade, Regional Integration and Infrastructure*; (4) *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*; (5) *Energy*; (6) *Climate Change and Environment*; (7) *Migration, Mobility and Employment*; and (8) *Science, Information Society and Technology*. Underpinned by political dialogue, this new relationship augurs well for economic development, the advance of democracy and the improvement of the human condition in Africa.

2. Struggle for Self-Determination

Decolonisation turned the former colonies into independent states. Independence, however, did not translate into real self-determination. In a holistic sense, the principle of the right to self-determination has three dimensions:

- (1) It means the political right of a nation to determine its international political status, decide its future and manage its own affairs.
- (2) It signifies the right of a people to a government of their choice; the right to freely constitute or change their government as they deem fit.

(3) It denotes the right of diverse groups within a nation to cultural autonomy; the right to use, preserve and develop their culture, language and traditions.

Besides pedagogical advantages in early learning and intellectual development, an own language gives people knowledge of their history, connection with their culture and continuity of their identity. It is in recognition of these values that the UN celebrates 21 February as *International Mother Language Day*.

The struggle for self-determination in Africa was not merely a struggle against colonial rule. It aimed as much for national liberation as for fundamental socioeconomic transformation. It was hoped that decolonisation would usher in a new democratic dispensation that would open the political, economic and cultural space for freedom from oppression, want and marginalisation. Applied in its idealistic construct, the exercise of self-determination as a nation, as a people and as diverse groups could have produced an independent, democratic and developmental State able to empower the people and improve the human condition.

Regrettably, however, this was not to be! Upon accession to independence and seizure of State power, the new national political elites - themselves products of colonial education - merely replicated the colonial state. They entrenched its “highly centralised, authoritarian and self-serving” features. In the words of Frantz Fanon, they were “*Black Skin, White Masks*”.

Abandoning the early promise of the nationalist project, they sought to extend their hold on power by any means, including the use of force to silence, repress or eliminate any opposition. These features underlie the dismal record of failure of the prototype modern African State to build functional governance structures and viable institutions able to deliver freedom, democracy and prosperity for the great majority of its citizens.

3. The Challenges of Democracy in Africa

Basically, the debate on the nature of the postcolonial African state and, by implication, its democratic deficit, revolves around the European origin of the inherited State system and its suitability to the socio-cultural reality of African societies. This debate has been characterised by two dominant paradigms. The first paradigm rationalises the relevance of the European State system to Africa. The second paradigm attributes the cause for the crisis of the prototype contemporary African State to its European origin.

However, I see a need for a new paradigm that locates the cause of Africa's present crisis primarily in the policies and practices of postcolonial African governments. Over 60 years after independence, it is untenable to continue to blame the colonial legacy for Africa's present predicament. For, the basic cause of the failure to deliver lies in the authoritarian, predatory and corrupt nature of the postcolonial State. Acknowledging ownership of the problem is an essential first step to the ownership of the solution.

Here, it would be illustrative to cite the case of my own country, Eritrea, which, despite high hopes that it would learn from the African experience and deliver where others before it had failed, has also disappointed. A once revolutionary movement in which I invested my youth has, after achieving victory and seizing state power, atrophied and turned authoritarian. As a national liberation movement, we fought for freedom, democracy and prosperity. At the helm of State power, we ended up with oppression, autocracy and poverty, producing one of the highest rates of irregular migration, *per capita*.

This important debate on the nature of the prototype contemporary African State aside, I wish to underscore that *democracy*, *freedom* and *prosperity* were the core objectives of the historic struggle for self-determination of the African peoples.

What do we mean by *democracy*?

Obviously, it depends on one's *worldview*. There is no "one size fits all" formula: democracy means many things to many people. The debate on democracy, or what constitutes a democratic State, is full of discord and contention at the theoretical, empirical and normative levels. The discourse lacks consensus while the practice remains divergent. Within the 'democratic' family of values, there exist examples of traditional African democracy, liberal democracy, socialist democracy, communist democracy, or guided democracy.

Each prototype, in turn, has its own variants. Let us, for instance, take the practice of democracy in the neoliberal world of the West, including Australia. There coexist many strands, embracing several variants and differing perspectives of democracy. The fact that national governments of the political *Right* or *Left*, respectively espousing the model of the *liberal state* or the *social state*, periodically alternate at the helm of State power as a function of electoral parliamentary majority, does not change the prevailing diversity in perspective or practice.

Yet, there are certain principles that distinguish a democratic from a non-democratic system of government. These are *rule of law; respect for fundamental freedoms; protection of basic rights, including minority rights; popular participation in the governance process; and transparency and accountability in public policy and decision making, including in the management of State assets and national resources*. A democratic State must creatively adopt these principles to suit the specific requirements of its historical evolution, socioeconomic conditions and cultural values. The form of adaptation may vary. However, the essence of, and adherence to, the core principles must remain constant.

To sum up, democracy has three basic attributes. First, it is an end and a means. Second, it is a process. And third, it is a form of politics based on universal principles. Among other things, *democratic governance* is a political practice based on the rule of law, legitimacy and accountability; a moral imperative consistent with human aspirations for freedom and a better political order with social justice; and a constant process of opening an inclusive political, economic, social and cultural space for all.

Against this backdrop, let me now turn to the case of democracy in Africa. The nationalist elites who advocated independence and Pan-Africanism became the new rulers. The end of colonial rule, or the advent of independence, ushered in a new era of hope and expectations of freedom, democracy and prosperity. Once the dust had settled, however, the discrepancy between the optimistic vision of independence and the autocratic practice of the new regimes became apparent. The divergence operated to obstruct delivery of the promise of independence and frustrate the aspirations of the people for a better life.

It seems intrinsic in political systems that those who have power tend to use it for their own benefit. It follows then, although this may not always be the case, that democratic governments use shared power to serve the *interests of the many* while autocratic governments use monopolised power to serve the *interests of the few*. With the predominance of autocratic regimes in post-independence Africa, wealth and influence followed power. This widened the income disparity between the *few haves* and the many *have nots*. World Bank and IMF *Structural Adjustment Programmes* exacerbated widespread unemployment and poverty.

Democracy was given mere lip service while autocracy remained the practice. Once at the helm of power, reaping the privileges and advantages of incumbency, the erstwhile proponents of *democracy, freedom and prosperity* became the new guardians of the *status quo* in self-service.

Widespread discontent and alienation fed popular unrest and political instability in the context of weak economies, fragile institutions and external intervention fuelled by the East-West rivalry. As a result, a cycle of military coups d'état and counter-coups became common.

The *kaki boys*, as they were nicknamed, overthrew one civilian government after another and seized State power. According to the African Development Bank, Africa witnessed over 90 military coups and more than 110 attempts between 1960 and 2012. Yet, the military regimes, many of which often sought legitimacy through the charade of sham elections, proved neither less autocratic nor better able to deliver public goods than their civilian predecessors.

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, the weakening of the East-West rivalry and the “*end of history*”, a new wind of democratisation began to blow across Africa. Revised constitutions, pluralist politics and multi-party elections became fashionable. In practice, however, ruling elites often used the powers of incumbency to tilt the playing field in their favour and disable the conduct of free, fair and credible elections to secure ‘victory’ and retain power.

Worse still, there arose the practice of manipulated and/or coerced constitutional amendments to abolish presidential term limits. Furthermore, the persistent exercise of the politics of exclusion, under successive civilian or quasi-civilian regimes, continued to provoke multiple conflicts, intrastate wars and civil strife along several fault lines.

In the mid-1990s, for instance, intrastate conflicts and/or civil wars affected 31 of Africa’s then 53 independent states. The lack of peace, security and stability hampered socioeconomic development. This, in turn, foreclosed the emergence of a sizeable middle class and excluded the creation of autonomous civic organisations capable of countervailing the abuse of power. An undeveloped, insecure and often divided, civil society was too weak to nurture a democratic political culture, defend democratic principles or serve as a bulwark of democratic norms. Most independent African States were thus unable to make a transition to a democratic system of government, establish functional governance structures or deliver public goods.

The concentration of power, resources and opportunities in the hands of a small minority in the capital fuels alienation among the neglected majority in the centre or the marginalised groups in the periphery. This causes disaffection, fans discontent and provokes resistance. Repression backfires and breeds armed rebellion. Armed resistance challenges the legitimacy of the State’s monopoly and use of the instruments of violence. This dynamic explains the many destabilising

civil wars and conflicts that have plagued postcolonial Africa while the colonial legacy of arbitrary fragmentation largely accounts for the interstate wars and conflicts.

Evidently, many African regimes preside over weak governments in fragile States. Obsessed with staying in power at any cost, they pursue the politics of division and exclusion through the selective distribution of power, resources and wealth in society, leaving a large majority of Africans disenfranchised, oppressed and poor. The failure of the prototype contemporary African state to deliver freedom, democracy and prosperity has eroded its legitimacy and rendered it largely irrelevant to the wellbeing of the great majority of the African peoples.

What then are the prospects of democracy in Africa? Can the prototype African State reconstitute itself and reverse course to reclaim legitimacy and relevance?

4. Prospects for Democratic Governance in Africa



Map 2: Contemporary Africa

It is very difficult, in fact impossible, to gauge or predict the prospects of democracy in Africa, or in any single African country. Africa is enormous and diverse. Its 54 states have different colonial legacies (Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone) and varied political systems (monarchical, presidential, parliamentary). With an area of 30.3 million km², Africa is larger in size than China, Europe, India, Japan and the United States put together. It is home to 1.1 billion citizens; more than 2,000 languages;

and over 8,000 traditional governance and legal systems. Above all, much of Africa is a deeply tribal or clannish society where identity politics matters.

Besides, Africa faces, with the rest of the world, the threat of random terrorism: ISIS in Egypt and Libya; *al-Qaida* in the Maghreb; Boko Haram in the Sahel; and *al-Shabaab* in Somalia. Climate change, irregular migration, endemic diseases and vulnerable economies also pose serious challenges. Rising populist voices of nationalism and isolationism in a *post-truth* era of *fake news* and *alternative facts* in the Global North represent added uncertainties. On the other hand, demographic dynamics, resource base and the evolving shift in the international

balance of power, wealth and influence from the West to the East offer Africa certain comparative advantages.

These undercurrents, driving national, regional and global events, would affect the evolution of democracy in Africa. The decisive factor, however, would be the internal dynamic: the way African States and pro-democracy forces meet the challenges and leverage the opportunities. In this regard, there are significant success stories which inspire optimism for the future. Cases include Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mauritius, Namibia and Seychelles.

In the final analysis, a fundamental reform or reconstitution of the prototype contemporary African State, based on the rule of law, democratic principles and respect for human rights, would be necessary to actualise a democratic system of government, nurture a democratic culture and sustain democratic institutions. Democratisation of Africa's political systems would require access to political power to arbitrate interests and allocate resources in society. This makes the struggle for democracy essentially a struggle for power.

In conclusion, I would like to list four key elements that could drive a gradual process of democratisation in Africa:

1. Economic development with deconcentrated distribution of national resources, giving rise to a nascent middle class, autonomous civil society and political pluralism.
2. Universal secular civic education to nurture an enlightened citizenship, enable participatory politics and promote informed decision making at the level of the individual citizen, society and the body politic.
3. Concerted national pro-democracy effort that is home-grown, inclusive and people-centred, capable of effecting democratisation from within. And,
4. Proactive international support for national pro-democracy forces to complement and strengthen domestic efforts and processes of democratisation.

Thank you for your kind attention.