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Democracy, Elections, Election Monitoring and Peace-Building in West Africa

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Abstract

This essay explores the linkages between elections, democracy and peace-building in West Africa. It engages in a radical critique of neo-liberal democracy and its ramifications for peace and development. This provides the context for explaining some of the limitations of multi-party democracy, elections and election monitoring in Africa. Drawing on illustrations from Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Ghana, the nature of democracy in West Africa is explored, and some suggestions are then made towards strengthening the democracy–peace link-age in the region.

Résumé

Il s'agit ici d'explorer les liens existant entre élections, démocratie et l'établissement d'une paix durable en Afrique de l'Ouest. Il s'ensuit une critique radicale de la démocratie néo-libérale et de ses ramifications pour la paix et le développement. Cet essai donne le contexte expliquant quelques unes des limites de la démocratie multipartite, des élections et de l'observation des élections en Afrique. Les cas du Nigeria, de la Sierra-Leone et du Ghana sont cités à des fins d'illustrations pour explorer la nature de la démocratie en Afrique de l'Ouest, et des suggestions ont été faites en vue du renforcement du lien entre démocratie et paix dans la région.

Introduction

Following the end of the Cold War, the institutionalisation of market-based economic reforms and multi-party democracy were considered as *sine qua non* for engendering peace and political stability in Africa. The

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World Bank and International Monetary Fund's (IMF), insistence on democratisation and good governance as political conditionalities for countries seeking credit or economic reform assistance became the norm. Therefore, a consequence of the end of the Cold War was the universalisation of Western political and economic values exemplified by neo-liberalism.

The essay interrogates the linkage(s) between elections, democracy and election monitoring as modalities for post-conflict peace and conflict transformation in West Africa. Central to this concern are the ambiguities between liberal democracy and elections in Africa, and the positions of Western democracies keen on promoting the multi-party agenda on the continent. The analysis that follows explores the utility of elections as tools for peace-building in West Africa. The rest of the essay is divided into three parts: a theoretical and conceptual framework, followed by a critical analysis of democracy, elections and election monitoring in West Africa. The final part includes recommendations and a conclusion.

Some Conceptual and Theoretical Issues

Democracy means different things to different people: a method, a process, a system, an ideology, a platform for power contestation and not the least a class struggle. Furthermore, the end of the Cold War has privileged liberal democracy globally as the most credible basis of governmental legitimacy. Similarly, democracy provides Third World nations badly in need of aid with the legitimacy required as an important condition for attracting foreign capital and development assistance. The foregoing produces some divergence between and within democratic theory and democratic politics, making democracy rather ambiguous and highly ideological, thus necessitating the conceptual question: 'which democracy' or 'whose democracy'?

At present, democracy has been transformed from its classical notion underpinned by the assumptions of *government by the people; common good, the rationality of man; and the contradictory goal of liberty and equality* (Rejai 1967: 203). Classical democracy has been critiqued for its philosophical fallacy, abstract content and an empirically invalid proposition or better still its illogicality on the rationality of human nature (ibid.). These limitations have done harm to democratic theory in two important respects: first, they have engendered different orientations about the democratic enterprise, thus complicating and making cross-national

and cross-cultural comparisons difficult; second, they pose serious problems for democratic practices, making it possible for regimes at different extremes of the political spectrum to lay claim to being democratic.

The differences in orientation about democracy are exemplified by a focus on three democratic models, namely: the communitarian, deliberative, and agonistic. While communitarian democrats are concerned with 'the community who share the same framework of values' (Gabardi 2001: 553–4), deliberative democrats deal with 'the public space of rational collective deliberations' (ibid.), while for the agnostic democratic model the orientation is towards 'a radical pluralistic public sphere of contested identities, moralities, and discourses' (ibid.).

Clichés such as *liberal democracy*, *democratic socialism*, *social democracy*, and *homegrown democracy* are products of these complex ideological meanings to which democracy could be 'bent', making democracy akin to a journey to an uncertain destination. Attempts at clarifying these, according to (Rejai 1967: 203), have led to the development of 'a set of propositions, practices, and institutions that can be observed and operationalized'.

The provision of 'regular constitutional opportunities' for leadership change, as well as an inclusive social system of majoritarian participation in decision-making is for Lipset (cited in Rejai 1967: 204) what makes democracy. In concurrence, majoritarian rule, according to Satori (cited in Rejai 1967: 204), is the very core of democracy. Under-scoring the fact that majoritarian rule is not a given but a function of deliberate political calculation, Joseph Schumpeter (1942) argues that democracy can only make sense based on its electoral imperative under which the people periodically elect among elites their rulers in a competitive electoral process. Huntington (1984: 195) similarly opines that: '... a democracy thus involved two dimensions – contestation and participation'. Robert Dahl's polyarchy thesis of a pluralist electoral contest is another derivative of the Schumpeterian democratic project. However, while elections are important to democracy, their canonisation as the *raison d'être* of democracy is conceptually and theoretically flawed. Unfortunately, democracy in Africa is oriented by this Schumpeterian bias for procedural democracy.

The essence of the resulting multiparty democracies in Africa is well captured by the Marxian position, as argued by Adejumobi (2000: 61), that elections are 'a system of political and ideological reification of the

hegemony and power of the dominant class, a system of social acculturation through which dominant ideologies, political practices and beliefs are reproduced'. In this wise, the importance of elections as a platform of ordered choices, and political competitions for installing political incumbents in an exercise that privileges the people as sovereign is seriously negated. Consequently, representative democracy '... replaces government by the people with government by consent of the people. Instead of the sovereignty of the people, it offers the sovereignty of the law' (Ake 2000: 10).

Under multi-party democracies in Africa, poverty, illiteracy, oppression and disempowerment of the people combine to reduce their political potency. Thus, the pre-eminence of the people as being central in the principal-agent relations implied by representative democracy is seriously compromised. Furthermore, these structural imbalances make it possible for the agent in the political principal-agent relationship to dominate the political processes and determine the possibilities and probabilities of outcome. With this, elections in Africa are at best superficial. This is because they do not adequately address the roots of structural social inequalities and inequities that marginalise and pauperise most of the people, effectively excluding them from politics.

To the democratic peace theorists, non-democracies are societies in which violence and coercion prevail. In such societies, highly conflictive relations make internal democracy precarious, especially where there is strong opposition. The result is 'mistrust and fear within and outside government' (Maoz and Russett 1993: 625). Consequently, a non-democratic state apparently lacks the institutional and behavioural constraints for war. It is argued that even a bad democracy '... does not give the leader of the government the incentive that an autocrat has to extract the maximum attainable social surplus from the society to achieve his personal objectives' (Olson 1993: 571).

The arguments of the liberal peace theorists have been critiqued on theoretical and conceptual grounds. First is the existence of a number of non-economic factors responsible for the reduction in international war-mongering. Prominent among these are the legacies of the Cold War and balance of power in international relations. Hence, liberal peace has worked only in the context of powerful nations (Buzan 1984: 605), a condition that has substituted 'a "peaceful" use of force for a "physical" one' (ibid.). Second, the discriminative and non-equitable nature of liberalism and the dependency condition imposed on Third World

nations not only keeps them weak, it also makes the use of force in their domestic politics inevitable. This is usually with the indirect support of powerful nations interested in the protection of the exploitative conditions of surplus expropriation (Buzan 1984: 617).

Democracy cannot be taken as given. There are a number of universal preconditions and specific contextual variables that guide and condition it. Huntington (1984: 214) advances conditions for the institutionalisation of democracy, namely: higher levels of economic well-being; the absence of extreme inequalities in wealth and income; greater social pluralism, including particularly a strong and autonomous bourgeoisie; a more market-oriented economy; greater influence vis-à-vis the society of existing democratic states; and a culture that is monistic and more tolerant of diversity and compromise.

The ecology of democracy in West Africa is different from that existing in the nations of the West. In West Africa, there exist a number of factors at the historical, economic and systemic level of the state militating against democracy. A major deepening factor against democracy in West Africa is the nature and the character of the state and the contradictions and crises it engenders.

The state in Africa is beset by several structural weaknesses. It performs a gatekeeper role and is used by dominant elites as a mechanism for rent-seeking. Under this condition, the autonomy of the state and its capacity to mediate between conflicting group interests is seriously compromised. Therefore, the public sphere of the state is appropriated into the private domain of strong ethnically based political contestations. Citizenship is therefore poorly defined, leading to the transfer of primary loyalty to primordial groups as opposed to the state.

With the state as the controller of national resources and their ultimate disperser, politics becomes a zero-sum game. This naturally engenders social exclusion and political marginalisation, human rights violation, corruption, mismanagement, irresponsible and non-accountable government and illiberal democracies; it also caricatures elections, marginalises and disempowers the people, promotes irreconcilable conflicts and makes peace unattainable.

The condition of democracy in the West African region is further complicated by the power struggle and mistrust engendered by the above contradictions between those Joel Barkin (2006: 18–19) identified as incumbent authoritarians, insurgents and reformers. These political

‘gladiators’ have different and mutually exclusive agendas: first, incumbent public office-holders/governments seek to hang on to power by all means; and second, the insurgents seek to institute a new patronage order.

What constitutes democracy ultimately is the expression of the will of the people. Bjornlund et al. (1992) put it perceptively thus: ‘However one defines democracy, it is irreducibly a system of government in which the authority to exercise power derives from the will of the people.’

Elections, Election Monitoring and ‘Illiberal’ Democracies in West Africa

According to Wanyande (1987: 80), ‘elections represent a way of making a choice that is fair to all – one that leaves each member of the electorate with the reasonable hope of having his alternative elected’. An election is therefore an empirical demonstration of a citizen’s liberty and political choice. It is for this that it serves to legitimise government. Properly managed elections provide a veritable platform for conflict resolution and transformation outside the battlefield and without bloodshed. Hence the requirement of elections to be free and fair. Unfortunately, as Douglas Anglin (1998: 474), argued, ‘while much lip-service is paid to the norms of free elections, too often the reality is a travesty of democracy’. Devoid of the attributes of freeness and fairness, elections become an empty shell, lacking any real democratic content.

Elections ideally reflect and impact on the orderliness within society, and the stability, credibility and possibility of rejuvenating the political leadership through the change of decadent members of the elite and the advancement of the non-elite elements. Economically, elections properly conducted promote an environment for capital mobility and higher productivity, especially in a post-authoritarian and post-conflict political order in dire need of reconstruction and development. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that elections in West Africa are the very opposite of the above conditions. As Villalón (1998: 16) rightly argued, ‘Elections themselves may be a strategy for maintaining power and many African elections ... have been clearly intended to forestall change, or even strengthen the status quo’. Elections as political stratagems for pursuing these agendas produce quasi-democracies in West Africa. This concern, among others, led to the institutionalisation of election observation and monitoring as an important aspect of the African democratisation project.

Election monitoring has however become a part of the global project to promote liberal democracy in Africa and other parts of the developing world. The Afro-pessimism and perception of Africa as the grave-yard of democracies are major factors in the increased importance of international election observations and monitoring in Africa. To Anglin (1998: 472), election monitoring is a component of the peace packages for conflict resolution and transformation in the context of electoral democracy. The logic, he argues, is premised on the utility of neutral observers in ensuring conformity with electoral principles. The presence of election observers is also erroneously believed to have a 're-straining influence on anyone tempted to break the rules' (ibid.). Unfortunately, incumbents in West Africa exploit the election monitoring mechanism to accord respectability to elections, especially since it poses no threat to the desire to manipulate electoral processes (ibid.).

For Bjornlund et al. (1992: 406), election monitoring boosts confidence in the fairness of the electoral process; helps deter fraud in the balloting and counting procedures; reports on the integrity of the election; mediates disputes resulting from the election, and vouchsafes democratisation. However, the seeming incongruence between the intensity of election monitoring and observation on the one hand, and the problematic of free and fair elections has led to the representation of the election monitoring by some critics as 'disguised tourism' (Soremekun 1999) and a charade (Munson 1998: 37).

It is noted that election monitors could face a clash of interests. In such cases, they need to remain truthful to the tenets of democracy. However, they also have the desire to protect and project the institutional agenda of their organisations. Again there is the tendency to comply with the hegemonic position and interests of their countries, defined in terms of strategic and economic interests, with human rights and democracy being tangential (Bjornlund et al. 1992: 347).

These contradictory interests are usually resolved in favour of the hegemonic power at home and the strategic interest of the election monitors organisations. A good example is how the European Union's (EU) desire to become a global player informed its involvement in the post-apartheid democratisation in South Africa (Olsen 1998: 353–61). Furthermore, France's strategic interests led to her increment of development aid and assistance, as well as its approval of Niger Republic's 1996 elections while other EU member-states imposed sanctions (ibid.).

The continued crisis in Nigeria exemplified by the deteriorating Delta Niger conflict and the proliferation of ethnic militias in the country since the return to democratic rule in 1999 provides a good case of the limited value of election monitoring as a tool for peace-building. The three elections conducted since Nigeria's return to democracy – in 1999, 2003 and 2007 – were anything but democratic. These elections were characterised by executive high-handedness, vote rigging, violence and zero-sum politics. Many prominent politicians – such as Chief Bola Ige, leader of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), who was serving in the People's Democratic Party (PDP) government (on the President's invitation) as the Attorney-General and Minister of Justice of the Federation; Alhaji Ahman Pategi, Chairman of the Kwara State PDP; Chief Harry Marshal, a PDP leader in Rivers State; Barrister Igwe and his wife; Sunday Ugwu; Hon. Odunayo Olagbaju, a member of the Osun State House of Assembly; Adamu Warri; Chief Dokibo, PDP Vice-chairman for South-South geopolitical zone, and Luke Shigaba, Chairman Bassa Local Government, Kogi State – were all suspected of being assassinated before the 2003 general elections.

Engineer Funsho Williams and Dr. Ayo Daramola, both gubernatorial candidates of the ruling Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) in Lagos and Ekiti States, were also killed by suspected assassins just before the 2007 elections. It is curious that in most cases no one has been successfully prosecuted and convicted for these political killings. In the run up to and during the 2003 and 2007 elections, hundreds of Nigerians lost their lives in political violence. Of note has been the violence in the oil-rich Niger Delta or South-South geopolitical zone where militia groups affiliated to political parties or prominent PDP politicians have unleashed violence against voters, and each other, in the bid to steal elections in favour of their patrons (Stakeholder Democracy Network 2007).

The foregoing suggests that election observers have at best been mere spectators of Nigeria's rather controversial elections. With respect to the reports of the monitors on the 1999 general elections in Nigeria, Darren Kew (1999: 33), a member of the Carter Centre monitoring group, has this to say on the monitors' position:

This was not a credible election, but we could live with it if the military would. Criticisms were directed toward what the INEC could do to improve the process for the next round of elections in three years. The IRI, the EU, and the TMG all noted that violations had been witnessed, but buried those comments behind support for the transition.

As Kew (1999: 33) further noted:

Most of the donor governments and international monitoring organizations had generally decided beforehand that they were willing to accept and indeed, preferred an Obasanjo outcome of the Abubakar transition, as long as the regime appeared to make a good-faith effort towards open elections.

The above observation raises some important questions about the real motives of election monitors in providing legitimacy to the outcome of elections once this fits well with the interests of donors and the international community. Apart from exposing the ideological underpinnings and ambivalent underpinnings of election observation, it also shows how it could hurt the monitoring of a grassroots-based democratisation of Africa in the long run.

The violation of electoral democratic norms has not been limited to Nigeria. The 1996 elections held in the middle of a civil war in Sierra Leone were similarly fraught with security, logistical and political problems that posed serious limitations for the success of these elections. In view of the violence, voting in 53 of the 58 polling stations in Bo was suspended. The serious rebel bombardment of the capital, Freetown, led to the extension of voting to a second day. ‘Whole chiefdoms in the Kailahun, Kono, Kenema districts in the Eastern Province, Pujehun and Bonthe in the Southern Province and Tonkolili in the Northern Province did not vote’ (Wai 2006: 16). The electoral management body was reportedly openly in favour of Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. Unable to contradict the claims of inflation of votes in favour of Kabbah in the southern province, the electoral body, the National Electoral Commission (NEC), was forced to reduce Kabbah votes in the province by 70,000 in the run-off election (Wai 2006: 17). This fraudulent election was not only sanctioned by the international election monitors, but hegemonic forces of Western nations represented by the UK and USA prevailed on Kerefar-Smith, candidate for the run-off election, to accept the flawed result, enthroning Ahmed Kabbah, the preferred candidate. This partly explains why democracy in Sierra Leone still remains a highly contested prospect.

However, in spite of other problematic elections in West Africa – in Niger and Togo – there has been some mention of a ‘Ghanaian model’ of electoral democracy. A number of factors have been identified as

being responsible for the success of the Ghana model. Among these factors, according to Ibrahim (2007: 6), are:

Rebuilding of institutions, re-establishment of the rule of law, proper conduct of pluralist elections, promotion of press freedom, reconstitution of effective local government, development of effective oversight functions and effective public probity in a state that had previously suffered considerable decay. It is therefore a model about the gradual improvement of state efficacy, democratic governance and respect for human rights.

An important fact in the Ghana success story is the elite-championed national consensus as to the viability of the path of electoral democracy as a platform for national rebirth. Thus, it can be argued, the internal structural political change rather than election monitoring lies at the heart of the Ghanaian model of electoral democracy, but it should be noted that Ghana's form of elite democracy is far from perfect. A lot still has to be achieved in terms of addressing the socio-economic needs and welfare concerns of the majority of the people. Democratic consolidation in Ghana will have to address the issues of inclusiveness, popular participation, freedom and economic empowerment.

The observation of elections in West Africa is part of the post-Cold War conditionalities aimed at promoting Western-style multi-party democracy and capitalist development in the region. As such its impact is limited to electoral procedures that would best guarantee the conditions for the realisation of its strategic, normative and ideological goals. This type of neo-liberal democracy neither really empowers the people nor includes them in decision-making, beyond choosing from competing elites during periodic elections. Support to civil society groups, the funding of research, workshops and conferences on different pro-democratic projects, election monitoring, provision of financial and logistical support for elections, training, providing for fugitive pro-democracy activists, mediation in conflicts, and in certain cases putting pressure on incumbents to democratise the state are some of the many ways the West has strived to promote democracy in West Africa.

The point at issue therefore is that there is a limit to which the West can insist on democratic reforms and the sanctity of the electoral process beyond the demands of market or neo-liberal democracy. The promotion of multi-party democracy is partly a strategy to prevent the throwing up of forces opposed to Western capitalist interests in a far-reaching process of popular or grass-roots democratisation. Obi (1997:

147–64) situated the concern of the US with election monitoring not only in the context of ‘post-Cold War diplomacy of promoting the uni-versalization of democratic values, human rights and institutions around the world’, but also because it would further the strategic interests of America.

In essence, offering a stamp of legitimacy for elections that do not address the structural political problems in West Africa is in the long-term interest of the West, because, first, it helps to effectively demobilise any opposition contemplating violence, and second, it secures the cooperation of the favoured ruling elite in the continued exploitation of the resources of their nations by transnational capital.

Conclusion

The democratic practice in the West African sub-region oscillates between pseudo-democracy and semi-democracy (Thompson 1993: 473–4). It is imperative for the countries in the region to move from pseudo- and semi-democracy to popular and people’s democracy. This among other things would require a new social contract built around developmental democratic states. This can be achieved only through reconstituting the state as a people-centred entity that is also autonomous from competing social forces. Putting an end to political corruption and promotion of inclusive citizenry and popular legitimacy will go a long way to achieving this goal. It is also necessary to transform the economies in the region away from their current status of primary-commodity exports that are dependent on volatile global commodity markets and an unjust international trading order.

Second, there is the need for serious institutional engineering, as the Ghana model has clearly shown. The many non-functional and weak institutions must be energised for political inclusiveness and efficacy. The police, judiciary, legislature, civil society groups, the mass media, political parties etc., need to be guided by the rule of law and the common good of society.

Third, economic well-being has been found to play an important role in democracy-building. Therefore the continued impoverishment, illiteracy, powerlessness and impoverished conditions of the majority of West African citizens are a clear negation of democracy. It is only an empowered citizen who can be in a position to make effective and informed political choices. Popular empowerment is a prerequisite for popular democratic participation and efficacy, just as economic democ-

racy, often ignored by liberal democracy, is a *sine qua non* for popular empowerment. Much will have to be done to effect the social redistribution of wealth, which is presently characterised by a wide gap between the few rich and the many poor.

There is no gainsaying that for a long time to come election monitors will play an important role in elections in the sub-region. To this end, a positive orientation to democracy and pre-election issues and conditions that privilege the incumbent against the opposition deserve serious attention in the monitoring process. A common standard for election monitoring is also imperative and urgent. The patchy and compromise orientation of election observers and monitors, Soremekun (1999: 26) argues, is at the root of their insignificant impact on electoral observation and monitoring in Africa. The West needs to change its orientation of promoting elitist and 'limited' versions of democracy that tend to promote external interests rather than the interests of the African people.

Given the cultural context of the people of West Africa, there is no gainsaying the fact that majoritarian democracy as practised in the West may not, given the conditions in the various countries, sufficiently address the specific interests of various political interest groups and communities in the sub-region. In these nations there is no room for oppositional politics. Opposition parties are often treated as enemies – to be fought and crushed by the ruling party. This brings to the fore the need to address the structural political challenges facing West Africa – the national and citizenship questions, economic crises and social injustice – and fashion a new form of equitable and inclusive democratic politics. A starting point perhaps is for a radically different, socially committed visionary political leadership to emerge from the ongoing democratic struggles in the sub-region.

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