

AFRICA'S POLITICAL INSTABILITY: REVISITING DEMOCRACY IN THE CONTINENT'S DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The pursuit of development in Africa has been a persistent challenge spanning over fifty years, marked by limited success and widespread socio-economic issues. Despite efforts to foster progress, many African nations continue to grapple with multifaceted challenges such as deteriorating health and nutrition standards, crumbling infrastructure, and pervasive socio-political issues including coups, ethno-religious conflicts, and corruption. This study examines the factors contributing to the stagnation of development in Africa, delving into the complex interplay of historical legacies, governance structures, economic policies, and external influences. Through a comprehensive analysis of past strategies and their outcomes, this research seeks to identify key barriers hindering sustainable development and explore potential pathways towards meaningful progress. By shedding light on the persistent challenges faced by African nations, this study aims to inform policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders about the urgent need for targeted interventions and innovative approaches to address the root causes of underdevelopment in the region.

Keywords: Africa, development, challenges, governance, poverty

Introduction

For over fifty years, the African quest for development had only marginal success. Most African countries are worse off than they were, health and nutrition problems are wide spread, infrastructure is eroding, coups, ethno-religious conflict, and corruption, poverty, unemployment and diseases are the basic features that dominated the third world nations.

Above all, poor industrial development and low technological transfer looms large. While Ake believes that political conditions are the greatest obstacles to African development. Other related studies such as, the dependency theorists focus on how Europe underdeveloped Africa, and have attributed causes of these problems to colonialism, imperialism and neo-colonialism.

However, it is not a deniable fact that, in terms of political instability and its attendant's consequences, the African countries had some difficult moments during the last fifty years or so. In this context most of the third world countries have seen its freedom heroes turn into dictators, while plunder of natural resources, politics of exclusion and deprivation to run the balance of power continues to dominate the public sphere.

To date, almost every country in the world is still haunted by historical injustice and oppressive structures that were bequeathed to the post-colonial leadership.

This is an aspect which informs the weak institutions of the state, flawed legislative system and constant struggle for political power to the detriment of the well-being of most of the nations, which could have move on a path of development as part of modern societies.

Political instability and crisis in the African countries may be as a result of both internal and external factors. However, the penetration of both internal and external factors especially the geo-political and economic interests of the international community constantly play a significant role in undermining the very process and institutions that are expected to nurture democracy and to instill a sense of stability for societal development in the African countries.

This paper is therefore concerned with the analysis of democracy, political instability and their challenges to the development of Africa.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of democracy originated in ancient Greece as philosophy of popular sovereignty in Greek City State. Since democracy literally means “rule by the people” the initial system of governance could be termed ‘direct democracy.’ In a direct democracy, public policies and laws are decided upon by a direct decision of all eligible voters. Given the complex nature of modern societies, direct democracy has given way to representative, in which voters elect representatives who then proceed to make the laws and policies affecting public governance. Democracy is thus a philosophy of government in which supreme power is vested in the people and exercised directly through participation or indirectly through a system of representation, usually involving periodic free and fair elections (Gana ed. 2005).

Democracy may be defined as “a political system that enables people to freely choose an effective, honest, transparent and accountable government”. As an ideal “democracy aims to protect and promote the dignity and fundamental rights of the individuals, instill social justice and foster economic and social development. (Human Right Report, 2002, pp.55).

The rise of democracy as a universal system of governance is largely a product of the 20th century. Viewed against the great variety of achievements in the 20th century, it is difficult not to accord primacy to the emergence of democracy as the preeminently acceptable form of governance (Amartyr, 1999, in democracy and the Challenges of Development in Nigeria, 2005). People from various cultural backgrounds have come to admire democracy as “government of the people, by the people and for the people”. Democracy thus, means a system of governance in which power resides with the people, rather than with the rich (aristocracy), with an individual (dictatorships), a royal family (monarchy), or with a clergy (theocracy). Although it has now gained widespread acceptance, democracy took a long time to emerge, from its ancient origins in Greek City States. The growth of democracy

was hugely facilitated by the French and American revolutions of the 18th century, the widening of the franchise in Europe and North America in the 19th century, to the heroic struggles for popular participation and social justice in the 20th century. With the collapse of communism, democracy has become established as the normal form of governance.

However, beyond the theory the practice of democracy is vital. To be of any serious value, democracy must produce good governance. It is therefore unfortunate if elected leaders under democracy fail to provide good governance particularly in the African countries. Democracy must be practiced to produce good governance, development and popular participation. Compared with dictatorship, democracy has demonstrated a greater capacity to mobilize the people for a deeper involvement in the development process.

As Fidel Ramos pointed out, “under dictatorial rule, people need not think, need not choose, need not make up their minds or give their consent. All they need to do is to follow. By contrast, a democracy cannot survive without civil virtue. The political challenge around the people today is not just to replace authoritarian regimes by democratic ones. Beyond this, it is to make democracy work for the ordinary people” (Ramos, 1998, p.2) Quoted in Democracy and the Challenges of Development in Nigeria 2005.

Democratic governance is valuable in its own right. Indeed, advancing human development requires governance that is democratic in both form and substance. However, democracy can advance human development for three reasons:

First, enjoying political freedom and participating in the decisions that shapes peoples’ lives represent fundamental human rights which are essential aspects of human development. Democracy is not the only political regime, which guarantees political and civil freedoms.

Secondly, democracy helps to protect people from economic and political catastrophes such as famines and descents into chaos. This capacity to mobilize people and resources for the common good is one of the highly valued gains of democracy. By facilitating dialogue, debate, and consultations, democracies also contribute to political stability, providing open space for political opposition to express views on national issues.

Third, democratic governance can trigger a virtuous cycle of development because political freedom empowers people to press for policies that expand social and economic opportunities. Open debate also help communities shape their priorities as a free press and civil society interventions provide new ways for popular participation. (Democracy and the Challenges of Development in Nigeria 2005). Therefore, without free choice, a government by the people and for the people” is a fallacy.

According to Jose Gasset (1930), the health of any democracy, no matter its type or status, depends on a small technical detail the conduct of elections. For sustainable democracy therefore, society must put in place credible institutions for the conduct of free and fair election. Any manipulation of the electoral process is a tragic attack on democracy (Human Development Report 1992)

However, the links between democracy and human development are not automatic; there are cases in which democracy has failed to deliver development, especially when few elites dominate economic and political decisions, as the case with most African nations. Examples are Zimbabwe, Niger, Rwanda, Nigeria, and Sudan to mention but a few. Ways must be found to deepen democracy in such a manner as to empower the people. Democracy that empowers people must be built from internal sociopolitical forces.

Theoretical Framework

The research study will be based on the propositions of modernisation especially its insistence on the acquisition of modern values – democracy, transparency, accountability and due process – for any society that cherish development.

This perspective blossomed in the mid-1950s owing much to the works of Marion Levy, Talcott Parsons, Max Webber, David McLelland, Everett Hagen, Birth Hoselitz, WW Rostow, and many other scholars from Europe and America as well as third world proponents like James Coleman, David Apter, and Aristide Zolberg.

Greatly influenced by the transformation in the West and the transfer of advancement to war town countries of Western Europe, this theory glorifies the harmonious, stable and developed western societies as role models for third world countries.

This theory is sometimes called Orthodox theory of development and is quite opposed to Marxist and dependency perspectives. They are mostly views of Western economists and political scientists as stated above. They believed free, unregulated markets played a mainly positive role in development and argued that developing countries' policies of interfering with free markets were largely self-defeating.

In particular, they argued that attempts to hold agricultural prices down and force savings out of farmers ("surplus extraction") were destructive of agricultural growth. Orthodox economists pointed to economic history to show that agricultural growth was important for industrialization. Furthermore, they argued that governments in the developing countries were often incapable of the tasks they took on simply because of their authoritarian nature and insists that democratizing those governments will give them human face and makes them think, act and react for the benefit of the people. In their view foreign investment helped growth and the transfer of technology, and foreign aid supplied the additional savings and foreign exchange that poor countries could not generate themselves. These aids are mostly given to democratic nations that shows readiness to follow the dictates of modernity in handling the financial assistance being offered.

The basic assumptions of this theory are:

- Underdevelopment is an original state and that importation of successful strides as exemplified by developed nations is the best.
- That under development is not subjective to any historical or structural implications such as colonialism, slave trade etc but a result of defective culture and attitude.

- That democracy and capitalism are the only path to salvation for the third world countries.

However, theory is also widely criticised as being

1. Too ethnocentric
2. Unhistorical and not structural
3. Biasness against non-western cultures.
4. Promiscuity between “traditional” and “western” because some societies believe their culture is more modernised than the European cultures e.g. the Arab World.
5. Ideological advocacy of capitalism and burgeor disguise.

Political Instability, Challenges, and Crisis in the African Countries.

The African political instability and other related crisis is a consequence of its leadership problems. Internally most of the African countries are governed in ways that have been regarded as far from the modern western state systems upon which they are modeled (Tutu, 2004 in Otieno, 2008). Leadership is not a new concept in the African traditions or cultural practices. Though, the forms and context could be different but these nations have their own efficient ways of governance, even before the advent of the so-called colonialism.

During the onset of multi-party democracy in the so called third wave of democratization, most regimes in the African Nations did not embrace the changes that accompanied the transition. For instance, most nations accepted multi-party democracy out of western pressure and agitation for change (Huntington, 1991). As a result, the constitutional framework and the state institutions have been tempered with in order to create a non-level playing ground for the oppositions.

Some of these practices have witnessed a serious violence during electioneering periods, which inevitably causes political instability. Though the form and context vary from country to country, evident are the recent elections in Uganda, Nigeria (2003 and 2007), Kenya (1999), Zimbabwe, Sudan, (2010) Rwanda, DR Congo, among others. In respect to crises, the African Nations suffer a lot of setbacks particularly the situation where both political and social crisis thwart the developmental path of the nations. Instances of skirmishes and full-blown wars abound in the continents, prominent among which is the crisis in Sudan (Darfur, Janjawid and Sudan Liberation Army), Rwanda (Tusi and Hutu), Ivory Coast, Chad, Niger (recent coup by the military), Madagascar, Nigeria (Religious and ethnic crisis in Jos, Kaduna, Borno and Yobe states), Somalia (Al-Shabbab and the fragile government backed by the AU), etc.

Whereas the earlier generation of African leaders had viewed democracy and development as antithetical, associated democracy with ethnic conflict resulting in wastage of limited resources, new African elites and organizations in civil society have taken to the barricades to demand democracy not only for its own sake but for its instrumental value as well.

In contrast to the intellectual consensus and state practice of the earlier era, a strong linkage between democracy and development has been vigorously asserted in the post –Cold War era of superpower disinterest and withdrawal (Ake, 1990; 1993a; 1993b; Anyang' Nyong'o, 1987; 1990; Bates, 181; 1990; Holmquist, 1989; Mengisteab and Daddieh, 1999; and sklar, 1987). Quoted in Cyril K. Daddieh “Beyond Governance and Democratization in Africa: Toward State Building for Sustainable Human Development” According to Ake (1990) the persistence of underdevelopment is related to lack of democracy in Africa. While democracy is desirable in itself, Africa needs democracy because it would greatly enhance the prospects for development. He attributes the failure of the development project in Africa to political authoritarianism. By engaging in political oppression African leaders turned politics into warfare. They then found themselves besieged by a host of hostile forces they were unleashed by their coercion. This resultant state of siege distracted African leaders from paying attention to development which they relegated to a very low priority.

Secondly, African governments became disconnected from their people and governed without accountability. “As a result of this, public policy is completely dissociated from social needs and even from developmental relevance.” (Ake, 1990).

Furthermore, the trauma of repeated subjection to arbitrary and coercive rule has turned African societies into hostile force to be feared, evaded, cheated and defeated as circumstances permit. They turn their loyalty from the all-embracing level of the state and localize it in community groups, kinship groups, ethnic associations, or even religious organizations.

What is happening in Africa now is in effect the strengthening of the process of the localization of loyalties. We might say that as a result of political repression, we are witnessing, not nation building, not development, but in fact, the dissolution of society (Ake, 1990).

Ake goes on to argue that subjugation has caused Africa's human resources, the very engine of development, to be squandered. At the level of the community, it has undermined the people's traditional capacity to cope, leaving many of them at different stages of confusion, withdrawal, despair, or silent revolt. The resultant human toll can be seen in the growing multitude of refugees.

As many elites have voted with their feet by migrating outside, African countries have lost the bulk of their most capable and talented people. Lamentably, those who have stayed behind have been denied opportunities and room to cultivate their talents for the development of their countries (Ake, 1990: 2-3).

The fact that oppression has not led to rapid rates of growth may only have shown that a particular form of tyranny is not sufficient for economic development. In itself, the failure of one form of tyranny does not establish the proposition that democracy might be better. It could be that there are other “structural constraints” that would thwart accumulation in a country regardless of the political regime. Besides, some authoritarian states such as Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire and Malawi (among non-oil producing countries) may have actually produced reasonably

stable periods of accumulation since independence, as evidenced by high growth rates almost throughout the 1960s and 1970s (Mkandawire, 1990: 10).

However, it is argued that, where there has been more respect for democratic practices (however minimal), higher rates of growth and more successful models of accumulation have been ensured along with better terms of the peasant producers (Anyang '1990; Bates, 1981, Ake, 1990).

Anyang' concludes that part of the "foundation of every true humane society" is "democracy"; and the "foundation of social creativity" or the "foundation of development" in the modern world must, of necessity, be found in democracy" (Anyang, 1990: Ake, 1990).

According to Aboubakar, (2003), the extraordinary challenge facing the African continent is how to cross over into the 21st century when it is trapped in the 19th century. He remarked further that while a sizeable part of the world is making the transitions from the industrial era of knowledge, information and computerization, the region is not following suit.

Aboubakar noted that economic and political obstacles to ECOWAS ought to be overcome to achieve effective integration. The economic obstacles are problems of recession, the gap between rapid population growth and technological advancement and inability to promote education at all levels. However, this view amounts to yielding to the pressures of globalization without overcoming the problems of underdevelopment that is overwhelming the sub-region.

In a relatively wider view, Chambas (2002), observed that, challenges to the African nations are multi-dimensional. The challenges in the region include wide spread and increasing poverty, globalization and the marginalization of the region." Other identified issues are the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and other diseases as well as the eruption of conflicts that create the image of political instability in the region.

The Consequences of Political Instability on African Nations

Poor Democratic Governance

Peaceful power succession has been described as the highest index of human development and civilization. Whereas it takes a simple process to institute, elect or replace a leader in the developed nations of the world, such processes require guns and tanks in many underdeveloped countries. This may partly explain the inability of peaceful power succession in the sub region, which has always led to political crises which manifests itself in dictatorship, lack of accountability and poor governance (Igezundia 1990).

Political leadership in the sub region is characterized by disregard of the yearnings of the people and a violation of the constitution they swear to protect. In the quest to remain in power at all cost, all forms of manipulations are employed.

This may include manipulation of ethnic differences, religious and political yearnings. In pursuance of selfish agenda, nothing is spared as long as the aim is achieved. The art of self-succession is the name of the game in the sub region except for some isolated cases.

Corruption

Since their interception, West Africa states have been facing corruption as a major problem. In some cases, it has attained levels of egregious theft, for which no possible or moral historical justification can be advanced, and which have played a major role in the alienation of its people from their rulers. The existence of widespread corruption, especially in the societies beset by mass poverty and very high level of unemployment has a deeply corrosive effect on trust in government and contributes to crime and political disorder.

In the political realm, corruption undermines democracy and good governance by flouting or even subverting formal processes. Corruption in legislative bodies reduces accountability and distorts representation in policy making; corruption in the judiciary compromises the rule of law; and corruption in public administration results in the unequal distribution of services.

More generally, corruption erodes the institutional capacity of government as procedures are disregarded, resources are siphoned off, and public offices are bought and sold. At the extreme, unbridled corruption can lead to state fragility and destructive conflict, and plunge a state into “remitting cycle of institutional anarchy and violence”. E.g. Senegal, Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Bakassi peninsula etc (Theobald 1990; Atuobi, 2007)

Conflicts (Intra and Inter State)

Intra and inter-state conflicts have been Africa’s most common source of insecurity and loss of lives for several decades. The pattern of intra-state boundaries, ethno linguistic difference, religious intolerance and a winner-take-all political culture are responsible for various conflicts in the sub region. Notable conflicts in the sub region are the Liberian civil war (1989-1997) and the Sierra Leonean crises (1990- 2001). At present, there are varying degrees of disturbances in parts of Senegal, Nigeria and Niger. These conflicts have led to death, wanton destruction of property, displacement of entire population and dislocation of social groups thereby hampering sustainable peace in the sub region (Ebon 1999)

Poverty

One of the serious hindrances of effective development in West Africa is poverty. The assessment of poverty is based on human indicators of longevity and good health, learning, economic means and participation in social life. According to the 2001 world human development report, poverty range from 3.9 percent level of Uruguayan population to the 64.7 percent of the population of Niger. The state of Mali, Guinea Bissau, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sierra Leone are the world’s poorest countries. More than half of the West African population lives in abject poverty. In the 1980’s many Ghanaians migrated to Nigeria in search of jobs but were forced to return home by the Nigerian government. That act affected bilateral relations between the two nations and hindered cooperation in the community. This poverty situation needs to be redressed for integration and development to be effective.

Military Incursion

Unconstitutional governments in West Africa started in 1963 when Hubert Maga of Dahomey, (now Benin) was removed from power through coup d’état. As at 2002, nearly all countries in the sub region had gone through the experience with Ghana, Nigeria, and Benin topping the list with five successful coup attempts each.

On the whole, not less than 25 violent successful coup d'états have taken place in the sub region since 1963. Coups have only added to the economic woes of the sub region, as investors are not prepared to invest money where there is no rule of law and their investment cannot be guaranteed or secured.

The military leaders themselves pay no attention to the development of their countries as precious time is spent chasing imagined enemies of government at the expense of development. Military incursion in politics has thus led to under development and loss of precious human resources.

Hiv/Aids Epidemic

Another major issue facing Africa Countries today is the dreaded HIV/AIDS. The incidence of infection varies from “ten percent in Cote D’Ivoire to less than one percent in Senegal” most of the people infected are between the ages of 0-49 years. A large percentage of this group makes up the labour force in the community.

It is projected that HIV will reduce the average life expectancy of West Africans by 20 years and reduce economic growth by 2 percent. The stigma associated with HIV/AIDS affects interaction and capital flow. This phenomenon poses great challenge to the sub region in terms of development.

Environmental Degradation

Environmental degradation includes deforestation, lack of access to safe water, and loss of bio diversity, climate viability and vulnerability of West African environment. Degradation of resources reduces productivity of the poor who rely on them and make the poor people susceptible to adverse weather, poor economic conditions and civil strife. Poverty makes recovery from these events extremely difficult and contributed to lowering social and ecological resistance. In the Nigerian (Niger Delta region) oil spillage has made agricultural activities difficult. The population of the area are now living in a pitiable situation resulting to impediment in development. Also, Niger’s desert population are severely affected by incessant drought and famine resulting in more adverse economic situations that further reduces productivity in manufacturing sector.

Terrorism

The use of violent and intimidating methods to influence the government or community for criminal or political reasons is another hindrance that makes terrorism one of the security concerns in West Africa. Terrorism takes political, criminal and religious dimensions in the sub region e.g. Nigeria has recorded two aircraft hijacks since independence (1967 and 1993) other threats at the airports in the sub region includes illegal immigrants, drug trafficking, touting, stealing, pilfering of fuel stores and sabotage.

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria is an unstable area where inter-ethnic clashes are common often access to oil revenue is the trigger of the violence. Pipelines are regularly vandalized by impoverished residents who risk their life to siphon fuel.

The ongoing insurgency in the north eastern part of Nigeria is also a cause of serious concern. The clashes claim hundreds of lives and destroyed property that worth billions of naira.

Conclusion

Based on the above arguments, beyond any shadow of doubt a true democracy could be a solution to our political instability, crisis, and underdevelopment. The only requirement is for democracy to be practiced according to its basic tenets of transparency, fairness, justice, guaranteeing the right of the people to choose and to change their governments periodically, the right for freedom of association especially in forming political parties, the primacy of rule of law, the freedom of expression and freedom of speech, and continuing accountability of governments to its electorate. And not the contemporary practices in most of the African countries in the name of democracy

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