

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

“Some African leaders actually dare to suggest that democracy is a concept alien to traditional African society. This is one of the most impudent political blasphemies I can think of”
 – Wole Soyinka

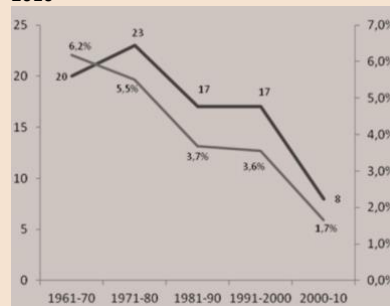
Democracy in crisis in Africa

The third wave of democratization, of which Africa was the epicenter at the end of the twentieth century, led many analysts to believe for a number of years that the continent was on the right track, gradually leaving autocratic regimes behind. Indeed, electoral democracy has spread rapidly across the African continent since the 1990s. Yet recent coups (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Gabon, Sudan) have shown that democratization in Africa remains a major challenge and is by no means a one-way street.

Although Africa has historically been the continent with the highest number of coups, with 220 of the 492 attempted or completed worldwide since 1950, there has been a downward trend (Figure 1), with the largest decline occurring in the first decade of the 2000s. However, this trend has been reversed in recent years, with nine successful coups in the last four years (2020-2024). This resurgence of coups takes place against a challenging economic backdrop characterized by slow post-pandemic growth and inflationary pressures, and a changing geopolitical context with the emergence of a multipolar world order. Hence, the question remains whether this is a short-term or a structural trend.

One of the criticisms of the democratic system in Africa is that it is a Western system imposed on Africa, with no reference to the continent's culture or way of life. Another concern raised by many is the use of elections as an indicator of democracy. For them, electoral democracy is instrumentalized by an elite that uses elections through various subterfuges to maintain itself in power.

Figure 1. Coups d'état by decade, 1961-2010



Source: Carbone, Giovanni (2013)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Recent military coups in Africa have been a stark reminder of the limits of democracy on the Continent.
- Holding periodic elections is not enough to legitimize a political system if it fails to create an environment conducive to security, social cohesion and access to economic opportunities, especially for young people.
- The concept of liberal democracy and its methods of representativeness need to be critically rethought in Africa, taking into account the socio-historical, cultural and demographic specificities of the continent.
- Africa needs to explore a democratic model based more on consensus, and less on majority rule.

This fuels the lack of confidence in the electoral system. Afrobarometer data shows that the percentage of Africans who have little or no confidence in their national electoral commission has risen from 41% to 55% over the past decade. Between 2014/2015 and 2021/2022, support for democracy fell sharply in several African countries (by 36, 26, 21 and 15 percentage points in Mali, Burkina Faso, South Africa and Guinea, respectively). The data show a decline in the percentage (-7%) of Africans who believe that elections adequately represent the choices of the people. Similarly, there has been a steady decline in support for voting as a means of choosing leaders (down 8% on average since 2011). This is also reflected in declining participation rates in national elections.

Although the majority of Africans are still pro-democracy, the liberal democratic model is facing a crisis of legitimacy. The popularity of the recent coups among Africa's youth calls into question the attractiveness and progress of democratization on the continent. It must also be recognized that democratic standards in Africa have been undermined for decades by governance problems, including corruption, weak institutions and socio-economic inequalities. After the hopes raised in the 1990s, the failure of democracy in Africa to create a framework conducive to security, economic development and social protection has led to massive disenchantment, political apathy, especially among young people, and a fractured social contract between the state and its citizens.

For many years, liberal universalism has been the dominant paradigm and taken for granted. However, the liberal democratic model and its ability to deliver positive economic outcomes in terms of jobs, economic growth and opportunity are increasingly being questioned. Electoral democracy is increasingly seen as an empty shell in a system instrumentalized by incumbents who use the tool of elections to confer political legitimacy on their new mandate, while employing tactics such as disenfranchisement, electoral fraud, or constitutional coups to minimize the risk of defeat.

In addition, external factors such as geopolitical interests and international alliances play a role in shaping the political landscape, as external geopolitical actors often prioritize strategic interests over democratic principles in their engagement with the continent. These issues contribute to public disillusionment with democratic systems, creating fertile ground for opportunistic political actors with populist slogans to exploit.

Why it matters

The legitimacy of governance systems is crucial to the maintenance of peace, security, and development opportunities. The absence of a political system that is widely accepted and in tune with local values and culture is an inevitable source of socio-political unrest, which can lead to armed conflict. In many African countries, the disconnect between the state and its citizens is a source of disillusionment and unrest. This disconnect is exacerbated by governance models that do not reflect the lived realities and cultural contexts of populations. Effective governance is also a key driver of sustainable development. Research has shown that the form of government has important economic implications. In turn, economic development is essential for socio-political stability.

It must also be pointed out that Africa is in the midst of a demographic boom; with a median age of 19, a significant portion of the continent's population is unable to vote in the current system, and the youth must rely on older generations to speak on their behalf. Marginalization from decision-making and disenfranchisement are leading to resentment on the part of an increasingly educated, well-informed and Internet-savvy African youth. They feel that their perspectives and priorities are not being taken into account. All of these are push factors that can lead to mass economic migration or to young people engaging in violence in gangs, terrorist groups or during election periods.

All too often, democratic processes, especially elections in their current form, are a source of **violence**. Beyond the material cost, it is the cost in human lives that has become a recurring feature of every election. Competitive elections have become the focal point for all the frustrations arising from socio-economic inequalities.

Another concern is the financial cost of elections. It is estimated that between 2000 and 2018, Africa spent nearly **50 billion dollars** on organizing elections. During the same period, the average per capita cost of elections in Africa (\$4.20) was almost double the global average and higher than in Europe and North America (\$4). In contrast, the cost in Asia was \$0.80. These high costs are a major challenge because they divert significant resources that could be invested in other key sectors such as education, health or infrastructure. Even more problematic is the fact that these elections result in a **low turnover** of political leaders.

What can we make of all this?

Some scholars have pointed out that democracy as applied in Africa today is a legacy of the colonial system. It is therefore doomed to failure because it is ill-adapted to the African context. Such arguments are indicative of a lack of knowledge about African societies. **Democracy is not alien to Africa**, where it has existed in various forms throughout history. While the term "democracy" can be traced back to ancient Greece, the representative practices, processes, and values that we now call democratic were as much a part of African cultures as they were of ancient Greece. This Western-originated view of democracy has made the West the reference point in the matter, with the moral authority to judge others on what is good and bad democracy.

Moving away from this point of view would allow Africa to revisit the forms of representativeness that existed in traditional African societies and to develop a system more suited to the continent. While economic growth has historically tended to occur in countries with liberal democracies, led by the United States, China has shown that a different form of governance (albeit with its weaknesses) can also provide a favorable environment for economic development.

It is also important to make a critical analysis of the application of democratic principles in their current forms in Africa. **Scholars** have pointed to the **adversarial nature** of the multiparty system as one of the causes of its failure in several African countries. For scholars such as **Wiredu**, this system is characterized by confrontation between political parties, negative campaigning practices, the choice of manipulation over persuasion of voters, and the important influence of money on the outcome of voting. In addition, the winner-take-all system of government that results from electoral democracies with parties locked into power for the duration of political terms has led to patronage networks and politics becoming a framework for entrepreneurial investment. Individuals and legal entities invest in political parties and expect a return on their investment.

In this sense, elections have come to be seen as the main means of resolving conflicts. In many cases, opposing parties in political or armed conflicts are pressured to go to the polls, resulting in the victory of one side, which then rules alone. When there is dialogue, it is to agree on the rules that will govern the election, which is often conducted in a spirit of competition rather than consensus. On this basis, some have proposed a form of **democracy by consensus instead of a democracy by the majority**. It is a system without political parties, based on consensus and compromise on the appropriate course of action. This approach is reminiscent of the historical perspectives of Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah on African socialism.

Some scholars, like *Moyo*, argue that it's not just in Africa that democracy faces challenges. Countries in Europe and North America are also experiencing difficulties. In response, a number of proposals have been put forward, including making it harder to repeal legislation, reducing the frequency of elections, limiting the length of terms, making voter participation compulsory, and subjecting the right to vote to minimum qualifications.

While these suggestions may be relevant to Africa, it is important to note a peculiarity of the continent. An obstacle to electoral democracy in its current form in Africa is the ethnic heterogeneity of most nations, due to the arbitrary drawing of borders during colonization. While European and Asian countries are almost 90% ethnically homogeneous, this is not the case in Africa. Ethnic heterogeneity is generally correlated with higher levels of political instability and demands for autonomy. Although in theory most constitutions and local laws prohibit differentiation or political activity on the basis of ethnicity, in practice political life in Africa is dominated by *ethnic* voting blocs, and many political parties derive their identity and power from representing ethnic constituencies. What's more, as *scholars* have observed, ethnic conflict within African armies has been one of the causes of political turmoil in Africa. So, we find ourselves in a kind of schizophrenia where, on the one hand, we value Africa's cultural richness and ethnic diversity and, on the other hand, we build a political system that wants to be blind to that heterogeneity. Creativity is needed to develop a system that takes this diversity into account.

Beyond this ethnic specificity, there are two important constituencies that any political system in Africa must take into account: young people and women. First, the continent's electoral system must reflect its age structure, with about 20% of the population between the ages of 15 and 24. While *people in decision-making positions around the world tend to be much older than the average voter*, the disparity is even greater in Africa. The voting age is currently 18 in almost all African countries. Cameroon remains an exception, with the voting age set at 20, in a country where half the population is under the age of 18. Adapting existing governance systems to improve youth representation and political participation will be key. By lowering the voting age and the age at which people can run for elective office in all African countries, it would be possible to empower young people and involve them more effectively in the political process.

Second, women on the continent have the same right to vote as men, but they lag far behind when it comes to holding positions of responsibility, even though they make up just over half of the population. There are currently two female presidents and five female prime ministers in Africa's 54 countries. Although there were regional differences, *women played a key socio-political and economic role* in pre-colonial African societies. It's important to bring them back to the center of today's political system in terms of representation and leadership.

Finally, it is safe to say that no political system in Africa can be successful and stable as long as the continent has this plethora of foreign actors, each seeking to assert their political, economic, or social influence. Since the 1960s, foreign armies, whether *state-owned* or *private*, have often acted as forces of persuasion or intervention in the domestic politics of African countries. In the 1980-90s, the *Bretton Woods institutions* and their structural adjustment programs destabilized many African states. *Various foreign powers* present in Africa put their economic and geostrategic interests ahead of the stability of democratic processes in Africa, and actively seek to influence the continent's political landscape. Self-determination therefore remains an important factor, while creating a framework in which continental and sub-regional entities play a leading role, free from external influences.

A call for an endogenized model of democracy

Whatever the political system, it will be judged on its ability to create an environment conducive to social justice, access to opportunity, employment for young people, freedom to undertake and enjoy the rewards of enterprise. The key for Africa is to develop a system based on its history, socio-cultural context and current population configuration, making the most of systems in other parts of the world, and modernizing traditional forms of democracy.

Endogenous forms of governance, hold the promise of being more aligned with local customs and values. They offer avenues for greater citizen participation and representation, which are essential for fostering trust in political institutions. By rethinking and revising constitutions and legal frameworks to reflect African realities, states can develop models of governance that are more legitimate in the eyes of their citizens. It is in this framework that certain recommendations can be formulated.

- **Endogenize constitutions and regulatory texts.** Design a political system based on **consensus**, taking into account African cultures and values, and drawing inspiration from approaches such as **Ubuntu, Ujamaa**, etc.
- Promote the **Africanization of funding sources for African institutions.** They should be independent of external funding.
- Build a **strong judicial system.** The rule of law and the justice system are at the heart of democracy.
- Build **strong institutions** that will facilitate and promote accountability.
- Promote **mass literacy, with curricula that emphasize civic engagement and consensus values.**
- Promote **democracy within African sub-regional and continental institutions**, with a greater legislative role for the parliaments of these institutions. This would strengthen the legitimacy of these institutions in the public's opinion.

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Afrika Nunya is a pan-African research center that aims to transform African societies through the endogenous mobilization and creation of a capital of knowledge transferrable to the continent's decision-making processes. The Institute promotes dialogue, the creation and dissemination of knowledge and the exchange of endogenous ideas on the challenges facing Africa and its diaspora, to propose evidence-based solutions and orientations. Headquartered in Lomé, Togo, Afrika Nunya is dedicated to establishing interdisciplinary platforms on issues affecting the continent in the fields of peace and security, sustainable development and human rights.

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