

What is the relationship between democratic governance and conflict in Africa?

- As we start this dialogue I would like to raise a number of questions that should guide our thinking on the topic for discussion this afternoon. To several of these questions the answers are obvious; to some not so apparent.
- I start with the assertion that the concept of democracy is not complicated, but the theories of democracy are.
- In its simplest form, the concept of democracy can be defined as ‘rule by the people’.... a “mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control, and the most democratic arrangement to be that where all members of the collective enjoy effective equal rights to take part in such decision making directly - one, that is to say, which realizes to the greatest conceivable degree the principles of popular control and equality in its exercise...”.
- Theories of democracy attempt to make this basic concept operational by prescribing how democracy might be realized, in what institutional form, and the content of democracy.
- It is a political concept and form of government, where all people are supposed to have equal voices in shaping policy (typically expressed through a vote for representatives).
- Democracy as a system of governance is supposed to allow extensive representation and inclusiveness of as many people and views as possible to feed into the functioning of a fair and just society. Democratic principles run in line with the ideals of universal freedoms such as the right to free speech.
- Importantly, democracy supposedly serves to check unaccountable power and manipulation by the few at the expense of the many, because fundamentally democracy is seen as a form of governance by the people, for the people. This is often implemented through elected representatives, which therefore requires free, transparent, and fair elections, in order to achieve legitimacy.
- As regards these issues there is no general agreement. I will briefly describe the basic differences in terms of three issues. One is the debate whether democracy should be extended beyond the political sphere to include the social and economic spheres. The

second is the question of the adequacy of a theory of democracy that addresses only the procedural or input side of the political process ignoring the output side. The third is the question whether there is one generalizable model of democracy that fits every society.

- But; Is there one universally valid model of democracy?
- Or, does democracy vary, at least, in practice from region to region.
- Is democracy in developing countries the same as democracy in the rich industrialized countries? This is a question that is commonly raised because some believe that democracy is defined by a set of basic universally valid principles. Others believe that western liberal democracy is a “luxury” that developing countries cannot afford.
- Is democracy an imposition by western capitals and or should African states be allowed to develop their models of democracy in their specific environment (social, cultural or political circumstances. Co-joined with this issue are such peripheral questions like; can democracy be learned/ taught/ transplanted? Or is limited intervention necessary to grow and sustain democracy?
- **‘Democracy is the worst form of government, except all the others that have been tried.’**

Sir Winston Churchill

In a democratic government key principles include free and open elections, the rule of law, and a separation of powers, observation of human rights.

Electoral democracy

- Joseph Schumpeter’s now classical definition of competitive democracy is: “The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” (1947:269) Two points are worth noting. Firstly, this is a theory of political democracy. Secondly, it is a theory of democracy that focusses on the procedural (input) aspect of the political process.

- Larry Diamond (1990b:2-3) defines democracy as a “system of government that meets three essential conditions: meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and a level of civil and political liberties - freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations - sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competition and participation.”

- **Failure of electoral democracy has become a major source of conflict in Africa.**
- Major reasons for a failure in democracy and poor governance in Africa:
 - personalized nature of leadership,
 - the failure of the state to advance and protect human rights,
 - the tendency of individuals, especially the elite, to withdraw from politics, and the extreme centralization of power in the hands of few people.
 - the state's control of the economy; this has meant that the only way to get rich has been through political office. This intensifies the problem of corruption, and inducing leaders to cling to political power as a shield against accountability.
 - Furthermore, in most African countries, the small number of individuals with power have managed to erode any semblance of accountability, legitimacy, democracy, and justice, which has been a basis of considerable disappointment to the planners, economists and policy makers who want African governments to introduce a reasonable and collective attack on poverty, disease, illiteracy, and other challenges to development. In the deliberations, certain desperately needed elements of good governance were identified, including popular participation in governance, accountability and transparency, the elimination of corruption, the protection of

freedom of information and human rights, and the decentralization and devolution of power.

Western democracy relevant in Africa?

- A common theme in the three workshops was the reminder that democratic concepts are not alien to the African continent, despite the impression created in the postcolonial period. Democratic forms and institutions existed in precolonial African societies, and their practice may be found today in some rural areas. For example, as a form of checks and balances, some nations exercised limits on the absolute power of their leaders by electing and removing African kings. Many rulers had to consult with community leaders before implementing vital decisions. Traditionally, popular participation was encouraged by using a process of consultation that allowed African leaders to reinvigorate their rule with community input. These examples, in the view of the workshop participants, demonstrate how traditional rulers in some African societies could not enforce obedience without the consent of their advisers and ultimately of the community itself. In the postcolonial period, too, democracy did take root in several African countries, such as Botswana, The Gambia, and Mauritius, where competing political parties, an independent judiciary, and a free press have been in existence for a number of years.

Challenges to electoral democracy

- Voter apathy
- Disenfranchisement
- Voter intimidation
- Parties not representing the peoples' vision
- Unequal demographics
- The impact of money in elections (capitalization of money in elections)

Paradoxes of Democracy

Democracy, with all its problems, also has its paradoxes. For example,

- People may vote in non-democratic forces
- Democracies may discriminate the minority in favor of the majority
- Those with non-democratic political ambitions may use the ideals of democracy to attain power and influence
- More propaganda may be needed in democracies than some totalitarian regimes, in order to gain/maintain support for some aggressive actions and policies (such as waging war, rolling back hard-won rights, etc.)
- Regular elections lead to short government life-time. This seems to result in more emphasis on short term goals and safer issues that appeal to populist issues. It also diverts precious time toward re-election campaigns
- Anti-democratic forces may use the democratic process to get voted in or get policies enacted in their favor. (For example, some policies may be voted for or palatable because of immense lobbying and media savvy campaigning by those who have money (individuals and companies) even if some policies in reality may undermine some aspects of democracy; a simple example is how the free speech of extremist/racist groups may be used as an excuse to undermine a democratic regime)
- Those with money are more able to advertise and campaign for elections thus favoring elitism and oligarchy instead of real democracy
- Deliberate confusion of concepts such as economic preferences and political preferences (e.g. Free Markets vs. Communism economic preferences, and liberal vs authoritarian political preferences) may allow for non-democratic policies under the guise of democracy
- Democracies may, ironically perhaps, create a more effective military as people chose to willingly support their democratic ideals and are not forced to fight.