



Democracy and elections in Africa: Critical analysis

Dr. Wondwosen Teshome B.¹

Abstract

The aim of this article is to assess the democratization process in Africa in general and the multi-party elections in particular. The decolonization process in Africa (1960s and 1970s), which was known as the “first liberation” completed by the emergence of many, new independent African countries. In most of the newly liberated countries the political parties that led the anti-colonial struggle established one-party domination after independence. The rapid democratization process (“second liberation”) in Africa began in the first half of the 1990s, particularly with Benin’s multiparty election in 1991. In this period, multi-party elections had taken place in most of African countries. These transitions led to “limited” democracies, characterized by a lack of liberal freedoms, low levels of popular involvement (except at election times), narrow range of civil liberties and the concentration of political power in the hands of small elite groups.

Holding an election is a milestone, but it is not the key to Africa’s democratic legitimacy. Many elections in the African region have failed to meet the internationally accepted standards for free and fair elections. Though Africa’s record on free and fair elections is mixed, at present, most of Africans have embraced elections as indispensable mechanism for determining their future course.

Key Words: Africa, election, electoral democracy, liberal democracy, Sub-Saharan Africa, wave of democratization.

¹ Department of Anthropology, University of Vienna,
Althanstrasse 14, 1090 Wien
E-mail: wonteslm007@gmail.com

1. Introduction

As Bratton and Mattes (2000, 3) said, “*Democracy is a disputed term.*” In Africa, the term ‘democracy’ “*has not entered popular discourse, especially where indigenous languages contain no direct semantic equivalent.*” (Ibid, 4). Therefore, in most of Africa the term is adopted as it is. For Shumpeter (1947, 269) democracy is a system “*for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote.*” Przeworski *et al* (1996, 50-51) describes democracy as “*a regime in which governmental offices are filled as a consequence of contested election*”

Samuel Huntington is known for his theory of democratization, particularly for his explanation of the “*wave of democratization*” in the world. He (1991, 15) defines a ‘*Wave of democratization*’ as “*a group of transitions from non democratic to democratic regimes that occur within a specified period of time and that significantly outnumber transitions in the opposite direction during the period.*” According to Huntington, the ‘*first wave*’ of democratization took place from 1828 to 1926 and the ‘*second wave*’ from 1943-1964. Both waves, he claims, culminated in a ‘*reverse waves*’ (1922-1942; 1961-1975) characterized by democratic breakdowns. In other words, in these ‘*reverse waves*’, many of the newly established democracies ended in failure, and only some countries were able to maintain the democratization process successfully. Despite the two ‘*reverse waves*’, the number of democratic countries increased in comparison with the period before the emergence of the first and the second democratization waves. The result of the first ‘*reverse wave*’ was the expansion of fascism. In the second ‘*reverse wave*,’ which occurred during the Cold War, regional conflicts and civil wars were the distinguishing features. Huntington calls the post-1974 period the “*third wave*” of global democratization. The “*third wave*” of democratization started in the mid-1970s in Southern Europe, expanded to South America in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the late 1980s, it reached Asia and spread to Africa in the 1990s.

Africa has experienced two waves of democratization. The first wave occurred when the colonial system disintegrated and, new independent African countries emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. This first wave of nationalist democracy ended up by establishing a one-party dominated state in most of the fledgling African nations¹ (Southall 2003, 3-4), characterized by political instability, economic stagnation and authoritarian rule.

The second wave of democratization in Africa is part of what Samuel Huntington calls “*The Third Wave of Democratization*” in the global level, which happened in the 1990s and after (cited in Southall 2003, 9). This political liberalization of Africa (“*the second wave of democratization in Africa*” or the “*Second liberation*”) which is part of the third global wave of democratization was examined by Clapham (1997); Diamond (1998, 1996), Diamond *et al* (1995), Gyimah-Bondi (2004), Joseph (1998: 3-17; 1999: 57-82), Quinn (2003, 231-258), van de Walle (2002, 66-80), and Young (1999, 15-38).

Africa has become the arena of “*democratic revolutions*” in the last 15 years, as indicated in the works of Anyang’ Nyang’o (1987), Berhanu (2006), Diamond (1988), Hayward (1987), Horowitz (1991), Keller (2005: 87-134; 2004: 17-54; 1998a: 275-292; 1998b, 1995), Keller and Smith (2005), Kiefe (1994), Kpunden (1992), Lidetu (2006), Merera (2003), Meyns and Nabudere (1989), Oyugi (1987), Ronen (1988), Wiseman (1990), Reynolds (1994).

2. The Democratization Process in Africa

For Olusegu Obasanjo, President of Nigeria, the minimum standards of democracy should include (1989, 34),

“Periodic election of political leadership through the secret ballot; popular participation of all adults in the election process; choice of programmes and personalities in the elections; an orderly succession; openness of the society; an independent judiciary; freedom of the press to include freedom of ownership; institutional pluralism; a democratic culture and democratic spirit; and fundamental human rights.”

A number of scholars have suggested various factors that determine the democratization process. For Barro (1999), income and education are very important while Glaeser *et al* (2004), and Lipset (1959, 1994) advocate for education. According to Linz and Stephan (1996: 14), without appropriate state institutions democracy is not possible. Therefore, if there is no state, there is no democracy. For Schumpeter (1947), Lipset (1959), and Linz and Stephan (1996, 34-51), the flourishing of independent civil societies such as churches, trade unions and free media are necessary for the endurance of democracy.

Moore (1996), in his discussion about the role of class in the development of democracy, emphasized the contribution of the middle class as modernizer and very essential to democracy. Therefore, for Moore (Ibid.), if there is “*no bourgeoisie*”, there is “*no democracy*.” According to Przeworski *et al* (1996, 40-41), democratic institutions will not

endure without a favorable socio-economic conditions. In other words, if a country has a democratic regime, the level of economic and development will have strong impact on the continuity and survival of democracy. On this issue Deegan (2003, 2) said, “...*There is widespread acknowledgement that the social impacts of extreme poverty-namely, poor education, disease and illiteracy-combine to hinder the process of democratization.*” On the other hand, for Diamond (1997), Huntington (1993) and Shin (1994: 135-170), democratic consolidation needs the formation of a democratic culture and the habits of democratic practices. As Linz (1990, 158) said, “*A consolidated democracy is one in which none of the major political actors, parties or organizations, interests, forces or institutions consider that there is not any alternative to the democratic process to gain power, and that no political institutions or group has a claim to veto the actions of democratically elected decision makers.*”

So far, political thinkers and researchers have not agreed on the number of stages in a democratic process. For instance, Schmitter and O’Donnell (1989, 6), as cited by Keller (1996: 203), a democratic process has two broad stages: liberalization, and democratization. The route to democracy, in this case, is from authoritarianism to liberalization, and then to democracy. Liberalization involves economic, political (or both), loosened restrictions, and individual’s and group’s rights expansion (Keller 1996, 203). Democratization is more than the mere expansion of political rights. Usually, liberalization precedes democratization, but some times they overlap (Ibid.). At present, liberal democracy in its purest form is not found not even in a single society in the world.

For O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), Linz and Stephan (1996), and Rakner *et al* (2007, 7), democratization process involves three phases:

- (1) Liberalization where the authoritarian government collapses
- (2) Transition where the first multi-party election takes place
- (3) Consolidation where democratic process is strengthened.

It will not be fair if we ignore the distinguishing features of “electoral democracy” and “liberal democracy” while discussing democratization process in Africa. For Diamond (1997, 3), the major distinguishing features of electoral democracy include: competitive, regular, free, and fair multi-party elections. But, liberal democracy is much higher in standard than electoral democracy. In liberal democracy, those elected in the aforesaid regular, competitive, free and fair multi-party elections are expected to be committed to

political transparency, good governance, and adherence to the rule of law and to the principles of keeping human and political rights.

The Levels of Democratization

Vanhanen (1997, 41) argues that there are degrees of democracy that could be employed to measure and separate semi-democracies from non-democracies. There is also a correlation between development and democracy. Scholars such as Meyns (2000, 86) suggested that it is possible to measure the level of democracy in various countries by employing the Annual Survey of Freedom House. Meyns (Ibid.) advocates the usefulness of such measurement tool because it covers all states, and the reports are published annually giving a chance for making comparisons, and knowing the advances and the setbacks. Van de Walle (2002, 68) is also in favor of applying the above technique to categorize countries as “free”, “*partly free*”, and “*not free*”. In a similar manner, Diamond (1998), Fish and Brooks (2004, 154-166), and Barkan (2003) generally supports the usefulness of the annual surveys of Freedom House for measuring the levels of democratization in one way or another. In the 1996 Freedom House report, only about seven African countries had a democratic system which is very close to the liberal democracy (Keller 1999, 103). The 2007 Freedom House Report categorized 10 African countries as “Free,”² 23 countries as “partly free,”³ and 15 countries as “not free”⁴ The other scholar who attempted to measure the levels of democratization is Andreas Schedler. Schedler (1998, 91-107) tried to classify political systems as: (a) Authoritarian (b) Electoral (c) Liberal, and (d) Advanced democracies.

Many governments in Africa at present are categorized as “hybrid”⁵ regimes. The general distinguishing features of hybrid regimes include:

- (1) Populist politics, opaque decision-making processes, and unaccountable ‘delegative’/strongman leadership.
- (2) Fragile democratic structures
- (3) High level of corruption and clientelism
- (4) Weak state capacity, and instability (sometimes due to democratic pressures) (Fritz and Rocha Menocal 2006; Levitsky and Way 2005; Rakner *et al* 2007, 13).
- (5) Political elites’ reversals⁶

Perhaps, the most common phenomenon in many African countries at present is a pseudo-democracy (Diamond’s 1997, 3-4). Pseudo-democracy is a system where incumbent parties maintain a tight control on politics in a hegemonic fashion by manipulating constitutions and

other governmental and political institutions to exploit and harass opposition groups and the civil societies (Huntington 1993, 182-187). In ‘pseudo democracies’, “*the existence of formally democratic political institutions, such as multiparty electoral competition, masks the reality of authoritarian domination*” (Diamond *et al* 1995, 8). The major characteristic features of ‘pseudo democracies’ according to Diamond (1997: 18) include: the ruling party’s extensive use of coercion, media control, patronage, inhibiting legal opposition parties from competing for power through various mechanisms. It also includes a phenomenon where the ruling party regularly wins (usually in a landslide) elections and controls almost all seats in the federal, local or regional assemblies.

For Diamond (1997, 18), “*What distinguishes pseudo democracies from other non democracies is that they tolerate the existence of genuine (not merely artificial, State-controlled) opposition parties.*” In Pseudo-democracies, the electoral playing field is tilted in favor of the incumbent, whereas in democracies the electoral playing field is not tilted in favor of the incumbent. Therefore, the freedom to form parties and nominate candidates for offices, and the right to campaign freely are adhered differently in pseudo-democracies, and democracies.

Braton *et al* (2005) examined and grouped the democratic level of African countries into five categories. These are:

- (a) “*Unreformed autocracy,*” *ex.*, Swaziland and Sudan
- (b) “*Liberalized autocracy,*” *ex.*, Zimbabwe and Angola
- (c) “*Ambiguous,*” *ex.*, Niger and Zambia
- (d) “*Electoral democracy,*” *ex.*, Ghana and Namibia
- (e) “*Liberal Democracy,*” *ex.*, Mauritius, South Africa, and Botswana.

3. Elections in Africa

One of the most significant ways people can participate in decisions that affect their lives and hold their elected representatives responsible for results are elections (UNDP 2004, 2). According to Deegan (2003), between 1989 and 1994 almost 100 elections had taken place in Africa. Moreover, in the 1990s alone, 42 out of 48 African countries made democratic reforms and held elections (Eid 2002, 2). In a democracy, elections have three major functions:

- (1) They serve as a means for people to choose their representatives. This could be exercised in choosing their representatives to a legislative or an executive office (e.g. Presidency)

(2) They are a means of choosing governments

(3) They give legitimacy to the political systems (Reilly 2003, 12).

Although it is very clear that elections play a crucial role for democracy they are not synonymous with democracy because as UNDP (2002, 54) declared, “... *it would be a mistake to equate democracy with regular elections: democracy also requires functioning institutions.*”

In the Sub-Saharan Africa, we find Africa’s oldest electoral democracies (Senegal, Namibia and Botswana) that remained multi-party states since independence. Their average per capita incomes, average literacy rates, and the average urbanization rates indicate the level of democratic endurances in these countries. Therefore, African countries had at least four multi-party elections since independence indicating how democratic institutions in those countries passed the test of endurance. In the 1990s, more than 150 multi-party elections took place in Africa (Carbone 2003, 3). We know that elections are important for democracies, but how significant are they? Bratton (1998, 52) argues that while it is possible to have elections without democracy, it is impossible to have democracy without elections. For him, elections are necessary, but not sufficient enough to constitute democracies. Therefore, what sufficient is not the quantity, but the quality coupled with favorable socio-economic conditions. According to Di Palma (1991, 16), Lipset (1981, 27; 1994: 1), Linz (1978, 5-6), Pennock (1979, 7-15), Powell (1982, 3), Przeworski (1991, 10-11) and Vanhanen (1990, 17-18), democracy is based on competitive elections. Though elections are necessary in democracy, we should not over-estimate their importance and commit what Terry Karl calls the “*fallacy of electoralism*” (Karl 1986, 9-36; 1990, 14-15; 1995, 72-86) i.e., giving elections much weight and ignoring the other dimensions of democracy. That is why, Schmitter and Karl (1991, 78) advised caution: “*However central to democracy, elections occur intermittently and only allow citizens to choose between the highly aggregated alternatives offered by political parties, which can, especially in the early stages of a democratic transition, proliferate in a bewildering variety.*” Concerning multi-party elections, for Przeworski *et al* (2000), a one-turnover is sufficient to establish democracy. Therefore, the minimum requirement for a democracy is if an incumbent political party actually loses an election. However, this should not be taken as a proof for a consolidation of democracy. In order to talk about the consolidation of democracy, according to Huntington (1991, 266-267), there has to be a “*two-turnover test*”. If a country passes the “*two-turnover test*”, then we can say that democracy is consolidated. That means, when

party “A” becomes a winner in the first election, and if it loses in the next election (the 2nd election), and if the winner of the second election is defeated in the other election (in this case, the third election), then we can say, according to Samuel P. Huntington (1991, 266-267), it is a consolidated democracy.

The other problem facing the African region, as Bratton and Posner (1999, 377-409) noted (after examining the case in Zambia), was the qualitative decline in the conduct of elections from the first to the second election, coupled with low and declining level of electoral participation. Proper examination on the multi-party elections in the Sub-Saharan Africa show two important facts: First, in any first multi-party elections in the region, except in Zambia and Benin, the incumbent parties won re-election. Second, in many African countries, the multi-party elections resulted in the domination of one party over a fragmented opposition. Therefore, we can say that in many new democracies in Africa, in spite of electoral democracy, most of the political systems tend to be dominated by a single party. As I indicated before, democratization in the Sub-Saharan Africa is forced to face considerable challenges, despite the visible progress manifested in the various multi-party elections in the 1990s and after. The most prominent challenge at present is flawed election, and the best examples of this problem are found in francophone Africa. Political developments in the francophone African countries clearly demonstrate how flawed elections can undermine democratization in the transitional societies. For instance, elections in Cameroon (1992), Gabon (1993), Togo (1993) and Guinea (1998) polarized the political parties and contributed for very tense and volatile post-election political atmosphere. But, the worst election-related violence took place in the Congo (Brazzaville) and led the country in to chaos, violence, and civil war due to the disagreement over the 1997 electoral framework (Famunyoh 2001, 46). As Van de Walle (2003, 299) indicated, multi-party elections in the 1990s took place in almost 42 Sub-Saharan African countries except Congo, Eritrea, Somalia, Swaziland and Uganda. Though successive multi-party elections were held at the turn of the century in many of the Sub-Saharan African countries, some researchers have indicated that the quality of the electoral process declined from the first to the second (Bratton and Posner 1999, 377-409), and the third multi-party elections. Furthermore, though the multi-party elections appeared to be competitive in a number of Sub-Saharan democracies, they failed the acid test of democracy: peaceful regime change in free and fair elections. For instance, as Rakner and Svasand (2005, 85-105) pointed out, the 1991, 1996, and 2001 elections in Zambia ended up in maintaining the same ruling party in power despite the country’s visible devastated

economy and poverty. The continuous rule and domination of a single of party in many of the Sub-Saharan African countries has put these countries in the so-called “gray zone”: i.e., blurred distinction between the state and the ruling party (Carothers 2002, 1-21). According to Rakner and Svasaand (2005: 5), the 1994, 1999, and 2004 Malawi elections demonstrated the above-mentioned electoral problem in the Sub-Saharan African democracies.

4. Conclusion

Diamond (1997, 5) argues that above all things African societies need time to learn democratic habits for democratic consolidation and to build democratic institutions that are appropriate to their specific political and cultural situations. Therefore, in this case, the process of democratic consolidation has to be gradual. In fact, democratic consolidation is not only gradual, but also uneven. That is why Sklar (1987, 691) argues that it would be a mistake to find a “*whole cloth democracy*”, in developing countries and suggests that democracy comes in fragments and pieces. The passage to democracy is not abrupt or dramatic, but gradual and staged process.

It is impossible to think about democracy without elections. As I have already stated, the litmus test of any electoral process in any country is the possibility of the one time minority to become the majority at another time and if there is a peaceful change of government. Unfortunately, when we examine the multi-party elections in the Sub-Saharan Africa, we will be forced to admit that it is possible to have elections, but not democracy. In addition, in the Sub-Saharan Africa, political freedoms and civil rights may be officially recognized, but in practice they are partially or sometimes fully ignored especially in the time between two consecutive elections.

End Notes

¹ Some of them even slid to military dictatorships

² The “Free” countries or “democracies” are: Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Mali, Namibia, Niger, Senegal, Sao Tome and Principe, and South Africa.

³ The “partly free” or “hybrid” countries are: Burkina Faso, Benin, Burundi, Central African Republic, Comoros, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritania, Seychelles, Somaliland, Uganda, Gabon, Malawi, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Zambia.

⁴ The “not free” or “autocratic” countries are: Angola, Cote d’Ivoire, Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Guinea, Republic of Congo (Brazzaville’s), Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland, Togo, and Zimbabwe.

⁵ It is a regime that is neither autocracy nor consolidated democracy.

⁶ The best example of elite reversals is the attempt of some African leaders to amend the constitutions to allow themselves another term in office.

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