Imperatives of Civil Society Foundation for the Emergence of Democracy in Africa

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Abstract

This work examines the imperatives of civil society foundation for the emergence of democracy in Africa. To do this, some historical forms of democracy were examined against their inclination with the civil society and how the civil society clings unto their development. The paper pointed out that the failure of liberal democracy in Africa was not unconnected with the parallels between liberal democracy and civil society involvement and by implication the cultural context of African states. In view of the anguish posed by liberal democracy, the paper recommends that Africa should equip the African Traditional Democracies for utilization in African States in view of their relevance to the Africans ways of life before they were stunted by European intervention.

Keywords: Africa, Civil society, Democracy, Foundation, Sustainable, Traditional.

Introduction

Western Democracy has always been portrayed by its entrepreneurs, as the best form of government. This paradigm of thinking, in Africa, is associated with those who believe in the relationship between development and democracy. This set of thinkers accentuates and promotes the assumption that: African countries can develop only in the context of democratic politics [1].

The democratic propaganda received a plus in Africa following leaning of Russia towards economic cooperation with the capitalist West and North America in the attempt to whittle down the Cold War. The Soviet’s direction gave the impression that Western liberal democracy which has the West and the North America as promoters was the best. Analysts believe that the impression was a necessary tonic in the 1990s for the West and North America, to intensify issues of democratization and human rights which dominated the West and North’s interest in Africa. The intensity of the North’s and West’s interest in promoting such a democracy in Africa was carried out without regard to Africa’s traditional democracy which was in operation before the colonizers forcefully stunted it from growing and maturing. It appeared that the Western intereners were of the conviction that it is feasible for Western liberal democracy to survive and grow everywhere including Africa in spite of environmental or cultural peculiarities of the people. While it not be possible to carry out a full scale comparison and polemics between African traditional democracy and western liberal democracy, what is actually clear was that while Africa’s traditional democracy proved stable and peaceful, just as the people were comfortable with it, Western liberal democracy breeds instability, prohibitive economic costs, serious competitiveness, and conflict among social classes.

Of course, events in Africa have proved the “everywhere possibility thesis” of western democracy wrong. Apart from the fallacy of everywhere possibility, the entrepreneurs of the western democratic system in Africa in the first place ignored the internal political forces (the people of the society) and second, the role of culture and environment on the emergence of social systems, especially the culture of sense of community that was already sustainable in pre-colonial Africa. It was therefore not surprising that Western liberal democracy is finding it difficult to succeed in Africa, especially given its prohibitive economic demand. Adetula [2] stated that the economic demand for western liberal democracy is enormous and well beyond the financial convenience of most African states. According to him, as soon as most of them were apprehensive of this, they set the stage to retreat into authoritarianism which is marked by irresponsiveness to the needs of the people, abuse
of power, repression, lack of respect for the rule of law and democratic procedures. In some African countries which have the resources to allow western liberal democracy to strive at the State level, are also lacking in emotional attachment to western democratic system. In many occasions for instance, successive civilian regimes in Africa, alienated the majority of the citizens whose living conditions show that they are not beneficiaries of the intended liberal democratic system. The cross-purpose between African states and liberal democracy is largely because it is not in harmony with Africa’s way of life.

The intensive diversity in many countries of Africa coupled with poor living conditions, have exacerbated conflicts of identity along ethnic, religious and partisan lines which affect the practice of western democracy and leading to its failures. These colossal failures led Oyediji [3] to ask whether democracy is un-African. Amusing as the question may look, it points to the gap between Africa and the anguish of liberal democracy. Some democracy analysts have in their quest to unravel reasons for the failure of western liberal democracy generally, made useful arguments which support the line of persuasion of this work. Rourke [4] argues that the yawning gap between the state and the civil society is a potent factor for the failure of western democracy. For him:

It may be counterproductive to try to institute democracy before a country has established a civil society as a foundation. From this point of view trying to impose democracy on a country before it is ready, can only serve to increase the chance of internal turmoil and decrease the chance for development.

What is perhaps clear from the foregoing is that the existence or establishment of Civil Society is a precursor for the introduction of democracy in society. This makes the following questions critical: were there civil societies in Africa at the time western liberal democracy was introduced at the initial period of colonialism? If so, what types? And what was the relationship between the civil societies and the Western liberal democracy so introduced?

In order to provide a descriptive insight into the discourse, the analytical approach is adopted for the discourse. The discourse is contained in four sections. The first section is the introduction of the subject matter and the problem. The second section is the conceptual prologue. While section three cross-examines the pre-colonial African Civil Society against Western democracy, section four is the conclusion. The paper makes two claims: The first is that the existence of civil society is a precursor for the establishment of democracy. The second is that the pre-colonial African civil society if it existed at all, did not have the absorptive capacity for Western liberal democracy.

**Conceptual Prologue**

This section takes on the exploration of the major concepts used in this paper. This is to aid the understanding of the concepts, and how they are related or applied in the paper.

**Civil Society**

One of the best ways of understanding civil society is to look at its historical roots. In the ancient times, human communities required cooperative behaviour for survival and utilizing ancient patterns of human coordination. At the ancient period, the civil society is a community of citizens including the family with defined values and skills associated with the good society. In the contemporary times, given the role of the modern state, new interests and political questions, have informed the development of new social formations (civil society) to advance the new interests particularly the way the citizens relate to the state. To this end, the civil society in line with contemporary realities is the aggregate of non-governmental organizations and institutions that have developed interests and will of citizens, and the path to seek solutions to social problems (ncvo.org.uk/a/almanac 2015). The concept of civil societies re-emerged in political and sociological theories during the transition from authoritarian rule toward more liberal democratic governments in eastern and Central Europe, South America, and recently, Asia and Africa. In effect therefore, the civil society re-emergence is a response to military communist and authoritative dictatorships. Civil society has come to be a mediating realm between the individual and the state. In modern state, the civil society reflects two central ideas: pluralism and social benefits on the basis of which civil society relates to democracy. The concept of ‘commons’ that is key to understanding civil society also relate to democracy. As a matter of fact, the civil society provides enabling framework for democracy as it attempts to provide a balance between private and public interest through its demand for public solutions to citizens’ problems. Part of what civil society does is to tolerate the rights of other groups in society to express their interest. Part of what the term ‘civil’ implies is tolerance and the accommodation of pluralism and diversity. Civil
society may establish ties to political parties and the state in such a way that it retains its independence. Essentially, the civil society promotes political participation, encourages people to exercise their rights by developing programmes for democratic civic education, etc. no democracy can be stable without the support of its citizens. This is why the civil society is a check, a monitor, and also a potent partner in the relationship between the democratic state and its citizens.

Unfortunately for Africa, this same Europe that resisted the homogenization of European societies came to Africa to colonize the people and subjected Africans to the same conditions which they resisted in Europe. Whereas Liberal democracy was a solution to the problem of assimilation into what they regard as the dominance of Western Europeans by the Romans, paradoxically, the same west came to Africa to cajole the African societies along the lines they rejected for their people. To Africa, liberal democracy has no basis as the civil society has no stakes in its emergence.

All that the people of Africa have experienced from the system so far is first and foremost, the conflict or crisis between the state and the civil society. One of its deficiencies is the method of its elite recruitment which negates completely the African way of elite recruitment and circulation, but was imposed on Africa to satisfy the exploitative interest of the colonizers. The literature in the area of colonialism and neocolonialism has shown the level of foreign sponsorship of civil society organizations in Africa against some states of Africa, in the guise of democratization. For instance, Diamond [5] observed that:

The 1990s have seen increased interest on the part of the Western Governments in funding civil society groups in Africa... These groups are at the heart of USAID

For Diamond, the liberation of civil society from the suffocating grip of the state has become the hegemonic ideological project of the metropole. A range of Western Governments, multilateral agencies and non-Governmental organizations (NGOs) had developed civil society initiatives in Ghana, Uganda and South Africa during the 1990s.

The civil society donors’ intention was the democratization of Africa along the lines of the West and not on the basis of the needs and aspirations of the people of Africa. In all of these sponsorship acts, the tendency is to set civil society groups against African governments possibly as a way of forcing African governments to entrench the European brand of democracy. Around the period of the 1990s some African countries were headlong in military dictatorship. The states that were under civil rule such as Ghana, Uganda and South Africa had their civil societies sponsored for the struggle to force liberal democracy on the Africa.

In spite of all these exploits, liberal democracy continued to be an illusion. This illusion can be attributed to various causes ranging from poor leadership to cultural context. Heather [6] states that development can only be really successful when it is participatory and contemplated from the interactions between the state and the civil society”. The civil society subscribes to a set of ideas related to peoples’ participation in the request for good governance, human rights and public sector reform in a state. Specifically, the civil society includes organizations or groups which represent the interests of the people (this time of Africa), such as pro-democracy groups, Employers Association, Labour Unions, Business Organizations and such other organizations and community based organizations (CBOs) who are motivated to checkmate the state for development.

In Africa, there is unmitigated chasm between this group of people and state power. As Iwara [7] posits:Most African states have developed totalitarian wings in their attempt to promote their totalitarian quest thereby maximizing their supremacy against the interest of the people.

This totalitarian project as we emphasize, limits democratic development as the civil society is pushed to an invisible zone. Some scholars describe the zone in which the civil society is trapped in Africa as paving the way for “infra-politics” involving wide variety of low profile forms of resistance which dare not speak in their own name for fear of being victimized or even killed as unbeliever [8]. Infra politics describes and accentuates the degree to which the civil society is missing in the scheme of democratic affairs in Africa. It also goes a long way to explain the authoritarian wings the state in Africa has developed. The lack of a meeting point between the state in Africa and the civil society only serves to remove an important factor of development from Africa. This makes the balance of everyday practices and power relations in Africa, completely a state affair, which makes the average African state totalistic, maintaining a statist economy and arbitrary power which does not promote the values of democracy and the
group theory of politics which emphasizes inclusive governance. The state in Africa by such nature, exhibits a contrary picture to the character of states in West Europe and North America where liberal democracy is striving.

In view of the incapacity of the African states to afford the fundamentals of liberal democracy stated in this work earlier, the states in turn lose the moral high ground to democratize successfully as they are unable to allow the loyalty and emotional attachment of their citizens to bear on state practices. As the UNDP Regional Bureau of civil society for Africa would tell us:The success of development and democratic governance depends on both a robust state and actively capable and healthy civil society [9].

It is quite clear that the civil society remains an important partner of the state. It is also clear that any state that desires democracy or development would see the civil society as a potent partner. So far, this paper has identified some of the limitations which inhibit the historic role of the civil society of checkmating state power and arbitrariness. But as it is often said, “it takes two to tangle”. The civil society itself has also created some internal contradictions which have not allowed it to perform as expected.

**Democracy**

For us to have an illuminating picture of this discourse, it is important to deal with the preliminary question: what is democracy. Democracy as a concept was popularized by Greece, described using two Greek words “Demo” meaning people and “kratia” meaning rule, which translates to mean ‘rule by the people’, the concept has over time been conceptualized variably on the basis of ideological underpinnings. It follows therefore, because of the subject matter of this paper and its focus, to define democracy in both its Western and its African Traditional perspectives. Western Democracy is a form of government in which the representatives of the people rule. This in other words, means Representative Democracy, operating under the principles of liberalism which is regarded as the protection of individual rights usually enshrined in the Law of the State. It is normally characterized by competitive elections between political parties. It is a top-down Elite Political System. Smooha [10] gave what could be described as the typology of early models of Western democracy which this paper considers useful for this discourse because they contain the Civil Society inclinations in them. In Smooha’s narrative, there are about five broad democratic forms that have emerged in European society at one time or the other, namely: Individual-liberal; republican-liberal; consociation; multi-cultural; and, ethnic democracies.

**Individual Liberal**

This type of democracy developed in Europe for the promotion of individual rights and autonomy, as well as national autonomy in the 1930s particularly in Israel. It facilitated equal civil and political rights to all individual citizens based on the principle of equality, and also a platform was created on which individuals competed favourably for opportunities, free mixing of people and so on. Thus, under the individual liberal democracy, the Civil Society envisions an atomized society contemplated as a matter of necessity.

**Republican-Liberal Democracy**

This model evolved in Western Europe, in response to the brutal policies of homogenization and assimilation of the resident population through the labour market, public education, mass media, freedom of movement and association and other ways of undermining or stifling ethnic and cultural diversity. Therefore, the focus of republican-liberal democracy is to enable nation-states impose a language, culture, foster a sense of community life in which people share a common identity and independence of fate among others, while depriving ethnic groups of institutional mechanisms for separate existence and making no pretense of state neutrality. This is because the republican-liberal democracies produce high degree of assimilation and other forms of subjugation.

**Consociation Democracy**

This is found in countries such as Switzerland, Belgium and Canada in the 1930s and 1940s respectively. The model recognizes group differences and therefore allows both collective and individual rights. It adopts a co-nation policy between majority and minority, propositional resource allocation, power sharing, and Veto power that allows minority to block any decision that is detrimental to minority vital interest and politics of accommodation, compromise and indecision. For many years according to Lijphart [11] Consociation democracy was jettisoned by the founders until it was again made popular and conceptualized as an alternative model of republican-liberal democracy. Definitely since consociation involves the complexities of use of veto African life style that believes so much in consensus building and cooperative activities may not be in tune with it.
Multicultural Democracy

This type of democracy arose as a result of the challenge of minority nationalism against homogeneity of nation-states and its inherent intolerance of ethnic and cultural diversity. The diasporisation and transnationalism created multiple identities and loyalties which blur the attachments to a single nation-state. The result was the decoupling of the nation and the state, and that promoted tolerance of ethnic heterogeneity and multiculturalism as an ideology. This is a midway type of democracy falling between liberal and consociation. This is because, it is based on the recognition of ethnic differences but without making them official and without institutionalizing the essential mechanisms of consociationism. Examples of multicultural democracy include the nascent South Africa post apartheid democracy and the type practiced in Netherlands.

Ethnic Democracy

This type of democracy is nicknamed as so in the East-central Europe in respect to unique expressions of ethnic minorities. It was practiced in the East-central Europe and the former Soviet Union. It is usually seen as a second-rate democracy falling in between consociation democracy and non-democracy because of its lack of civic equality and civic nation that generates other forms of democracy. The various types of democracies discussed above, developed from the West, East and some other parts of the world, each defines the necessity of its civil society and therefore the functions and reason for the state. This implies that each type of democracy has its purpose and a civil society that is its willing host. Each society or state gets the type of democracy it desires and not the other way round. This is why states that have socialism as their ideology claim to be social democratic states. Some even feel they are ‘developmental states’ while capitalist states such as United States, Canada and other States in the West promote liberal democracy carrying the will of their societies with them because of their interest in international investments and the propagation of capitalism. Of course we know Liberal democracy originated from the West as a way of challenging brutal policies of homogenization and assimilation of the various societies of Europe through public education, mass media, and other means of stifling diversity.

An examination of the above models of European democracies reveals some levels of civil society inclination in them. All the democracies indicate that democracy does not occur in a vacuum, and that the objectives of the civil society, count in determining the kind of democracy the people absorb. The questions therefore that bother this paper are two: (i) To what extent was the African civil societies involved in the introduction of liberal democracy to African States?, (ii) What kind of democracy is feasible for African States? Before addressing these questions, it is necessary to examine the concepts of “African traditional democracy” and “civil society” as precursor.

African Traditional Democracy

Contrary to the believe by the colonizers that the African peoples had no democracy before the colonial reign, African historians and researchers have in their works revealed that there were African traditional democracies before they were set aside by colonial intervention. Existence of African traditional democracies in pre-colonial Africa. According to their account, Africans were organized in their Empire States and Kingdoms, and practiced theocratic democracies headed by Monarchs or Kings with their Councils of Chiefs. For instance according to them, the theocratic State of Burundi had brought to focus the system of Baganwa provincial governors, which made provision for the often contested central power of Burundi.

The royal authority of the democracy of Burundi according to their study was flexible as there was democratic openness. Elections were held regularly and there were three methods of balloting: I unanimous confidence; ii, drawing lots; and, iii, sticks casting by innocent persons. Elections in the traditional Burundi were usually conducted peacefully, under free and fair conditions that enabled even giving power to a stranger.

In pre-colonial West Africa, like some other regions of Africa, the various State powers were monarchies in which one could find manifestations of democratic elements such as elections and sharing of power. African traditional democracies manifested in the governance in the empires of Songhai, Kanem-Bornu, and Ghana, while the notable Kingdoms which include Benin, Opobo, and Oyo also showed elements of democracy [12] In all the Kingdoms and Empires were found Monarchs and in some were also found Councils of Chiefs who made Laws for the good government of African Societies. In Yakurr Clan of the South-South Nigeria for instance, the king (Obol-Lopon) is elected by a referendum after nomination by the spiritual leaders of designated royal families. The candidate for the royal stool is taken to designated arena in each constituency of the town for voice vote of either
yes or no. if the yes predominates, then the candidate is returned elected and vice versa. The same goes for the office of Okpebili (Prime Minister).

It is important to state categorically that the African peoples’ democracies had similar features in all the kingdoms of pre-colonial Africa with little divergences. The African democracies were theocratic in nature; they had democratic elements such as regular elections, popular will. The African traditional democracies may not be as developed as the western or European liberal democracy which has been developed for many years, but their stable and peaceful nature makes them more suitable for Africa. As noted by Gyekye [13] the traditional system of government of pre-colonial Africa did have some democratic features from which new political systems can profit.

Pre-Colonial African Civil Society and Western Democracy

This section of the paper focuses on trying as far as possible to identify the form of civil society that Western liberal democracy interacted with at the period of its introduction in African societies. To this end, the paper examines the pre-colonial modes of production with a view to identifying their social relations. This methodology is based on the Marxist logic that every mode of production has its corresponding social relations. The extant literature in pre-colonial sub-Saharan African society is dominated by two schools of thought, the Marxist school led by Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, and what is regarded as the African School led by such scholars as Gyekye Kwame, Samir Amin, Majhmout Diop, and others (http://ll.unu.edu). The orthodox Marxists analysis contends that apart from a few non-determining specific features, the pre-colonial Sub-Saharan African Societies belonging to Asiatic modes of production societies such as Primitive Commune, Slave and Feudal types. Some African scholars and students of African History argue against the claim of the Marxist classic categories stating that, though the pre-colonial Sub-Saharan African Societies have elements of Asiatic mode of production types, the African Pre-colonial relations of production are unique, especially those of tropical Africa.

Feudalism in Africa was different from that of Western Europe where the feudal lords have private and personal rights over land. African Societies he argued did not have private ownership of land and could not therefore be included in the framework of European feudalism. In any case, irrespective of any writer’s conception of feudalism, there were abundant evidences to prove that the pre-colonial African societies were people that dependent on land as their main occupations as acknowledged by African historians include hunting, cereal agricultural farming, etc. Also clear was that the African societies were organized in family communities with war chiefs for territorial land expansion. Also clear was their idiosyncratic life or personal mannerism. All this indications show that the pre-colonial African societies had no organized civil societies that could mediate between the citizens and the state at the commencement of colonial rule and by implication, penetrate the Western democracy that was subsequently introduced. Louise White [14] posited that the first Civil Societies in Africa developed as a result of the activities of independent struggle, using cultural Society was more associated with civic virtue during the independence struggle well after liberal democracy was introduced. In view of this, this paper holds that Western liberal democracy had no corresponding civil society in Africa and as such, liberal democracy was forced on the Africans without absorptive capacity. To this extent, it is instructive that Africa tries an alternative system, that is, the African traditional democracy that had given African societies, relative peace and stability during the pre-colonial era. The absence of a relevant civil society that can undertake the roles played by civil societies in the West, make Western democracy in Africa, vilified.

It is therefore clearly axiomatic that democracy must have bearing with the context of social life of the people for whom a particular democracy is meant. Any departure from this premise relegates the idea of democracy and can be seen as antidemocratic as history already has proven [15]. The principal purpose of liberal democracy which unfortunately was introduced to Africa without a foundation was to establish democratic governments for the protection and promotion of rights, interests and welfare of the people, but it eventually worked to the contrary. The people of Africa are already getting frustrated as their political gladiators are struggling unsuccessfully with the exogenous liberal democracy just as the colonial mentality continues unabated.

This is not to say that African governments are not part of the problem but the fact remains that they are junior partners in the unfortunate incidences brought forth by liberal democracy in Africa. The divide and rule principle was the hallmark of colonial rule, which denied Africa the systematic development of relevant social institutions that can facilitate the checks and balances in a modern state. There appears to be
a realization among African peoples, that African leaders are having operational problems with liberal democracy and are asking for another wing of liberation. Ake [1] accentuated this fact when he wrote:

...Africa requires somewhat more than the crude variety of liberal democracy that is being foisted on it, and even more than the impoverished liberal democracy that prevails in the industrialized countries.... Even at its best liberal democracy is inimical to the idea of the people

A very fundamental problem of liberal democracy in Africa as is that apart from its cross-purposes with African cultures, some contemporary African States merely become formally democratic by holding regular elections, adopting new constitutions, operating multiparty politics, etc, in order to satisfy the requirements for aid from Western Countries and institutions. Liberal democracy anywhere it survives is predicated on market oriented economies. Unfortunately, African Countries run moral economies which make African Countries, economically dirigiste [16]. Given the economies of African Countries therefore, and their political economy based on African Cultures, African Traditional Democracy remains the best option for African Countries.

The problem that could be envisaged concerns the multi-cultural situation of some African Countries which may make African democracy a complex idea. This invariably could be a way of strengthening true federalism in the affected Countries. In Nigeria for instance, the country has about 250 ethno-cultural groups, but the division of the country into six geo-political zones was based on cultural similarity and geographical contiguity. The South-South and the south-East geo-political zones’ cultures have similar features and could operate as a democratic unit. Since many African Countries share this experience, the same democratic structuring could be made in all the sub-regions of Africa [17-18].

Conclusion

This paper has been able to establish the necessity of the existence of civil society as precursor for the introduction of democracy of any sort because of its indelible role. It argues that there was traditional democracy, which was the vogue in African Societies before it was stunted and prevented from growing and maturing by colonial intervention. The African traditional democracy was based on the cultures of African Societies and Africa’s world view. The examination of some European democratic models reveals the civil society inclinations in them, and the lesson is that democracy must have bearing with the context of social life of the people who bears its direct impact. From this perspective is the view that the civil society is the foundation of any democratic system.

References


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