

**BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN
AFRICA: WHAT ARE THE MISSING LINKS?**

By

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“Democracy is no vaccination against poverty”

- UNDP¹

“ If there is no equal sharing of goods, there can be no equal sharing of power. So, for me, this equal sharing is crucial to the definition of democracy. If democracy is the right to have a decent life, health, education, freedom, and security, then I am a democrat. But I am questioning whether this is really the case in some of the biggest democracies in the World today?”

- Nadia Leila Aissaoui²

Introduction

The last two decades of the 20th century witnessed renewed hope about the birth of democracy in Africa. The process was actively supported by all segments of society - labour, students, market women, rural dwellers, and the lumpen elements, who saw in it the prospects of reversing the trend of political despair and disillusionment that hitherto characterised political life in Africa³. The orgy of political tyranny and dictatorship while having its own clientele and beneficiaries had negative and suffocating effects on the majority of the people. The political space was contrived, entrepreneurial creativity and ingenuity stifled, and the logic of difference, of social pluralism, cultural divergences and identities, suppressed. The opening up of the political space constitutes an uncompromisable part of the democratic agenda of the African people.

The democratic aspiration of the African people is not only confined to the arena of political democracy (of elections, and granting of civil and political rights), but involves the demand for economic empowerment, better living standards, and adequate social welfare. Indeed, for the majority of the people, democracy is meaningful only when it delivers socio-economic goods. In other words, political democracy must be linked to socio-economic development. The deteriorating social welfare and living standards of the people in spite of the vote for democracy is gradually undermining the confidence of the people in the new democratic order. As a Nigerian petty trader aptly puts it; “Na democracy we go chop?”⁴.

Given the above context, what is the correlation between democracy and socio-economic development? How can democracy be constituted to give a push to development? What are the missing links between democracy and development? How can the triple elements of economic growth, equity, and social welfare be promoted in a democratic order? These are the salient issues addressed by this paper.

The Democracy – Development Debate

The intellectual debate on the linkage between democracy and development has witnessed some twists and turns driven by the currents of global political changes. In the 1960s and 1970s before the current democratic upsurge, the focus of debate on the connection between democracy and development was on how the latter constitutes a prerequisite for and enhances the former. That is, under what mode of economic system and stage of economic development is democracy consummated? Conversely, under what form of economic system is democracy not likely to take root and grow? The economy was treated as an independent variable and the polity, dependent. The attempt was to explain why democracy exists in some countries and not in others.

The two dominant intellectual paradigms in the social sciences at this period, the modernisation and the Marxist theories, share a common ground on the interface between democracy and development, albeit from different standpoints. The modernisation theory contends that democracy corresponds with the industrial phase of capitalist development⁵. Capitalist development promotes features like structural differentiation, secularism, bureaucratisation, urbanisation, and individualism, all of which engenders a new logic of power and “ethics of governance”, of liberal democratic politics. The social structure which industrial capitalism foists reinforces democratic values. The existence of a thriving middle class in an industrial capitalist society is seen to be crucial to the growth and protection of a liberal democratic order. Liberal democracy is viewed as an outcome, and not a cause of economic development.

In the Marxist and neo-Marxist conception, the centrality of the economy to the mode of politics was also emphasized. The economy was considered as the sub-structure of society, which determines the superstructure that includes the polity. As such, liberal democracy was conceived as the limited form of democracy possible under industrial

capitalism. “Backward” and agrarian societies do not have the perquisites for democratic practices. Neo-Marxist paradigm prioritizes the issues economic underdevelopment and dependency as the prime political agenda for Third World countries to resolve.

While the intellectual current of the 1960s and 1970s was open to critique, its import was a deprioritisation of democracy in the Third World countries. Democracy was considered a secondary priority for Third world countries, since in any case it could hardly evolve in those contexts. The concern was to be with the issue of economic development, after which democracy may logically follow. This was the intellectual crest on which political dictatorships and military rule were justified in Africa. Indeed, military rulers in Africa were eulogised by Western civil-military relations’ experts as “modernising soldiers”⁶. Thus, the ideology of development adopted by most African rulers was a ‘dictatorship of development’, rather than the ‘democratisation of development’. Development became a political cliché over and above which no other thing suffices.

From the 1980s when a new tide of global democratic change resonated in most parts of the world, the emphasis of academic discourse on the linkage between democracy and development shifted to the object and purposes of democracy. That is, is democracy to be construed as a means to an end or an end in itself?⁷ The debate centered on what Adrian Leftwich calls the developmentalist efficacy of democracy⁸. The new discourse privileges democracy and politics as the primacy in economic development. It turns the old argument on its head, by repudiating the theoretical prejudice that democracy is an outcome of a particular economic system and stage of development, which can found in some societies and not in others. Democracy assumes a universal political product. The new debate centers on whether democracy is the cause and major facilitator of economic development. Democracy has become the independent variable, and economic development, dependent. The political import is that democracy can now be accepted, tolerated and promoted for all societies.

But the nexus between democracy and development remains contestable even in the present conjuncture. To some, liberal democracy provides the basic foundation for economic development. It is argued that libertarian values like freedom of speech and

association, the rule of law, multipartyism and elections, the protection of human rights and separation of powers create the institutional context and processes for economic development to take place. It facilitates economic empowerment, provides a stable investment climate, and ensures rapid mobilisation of national energies and resources for economic development. In Africa, those who share this view, point to the fast and stable economic growth rate of countries like Botswana and Mauritius, which are two countries that have had stable liberal democratic polity in Africa⁹. Between 1965 and 1990, the rate of growth of the Gross National product (GNP) per capita for Botswana and Mauritius was 8.4% and 3.2% respectively. These figures are contrasted with that of non-democratic polities like the Republic of the Congo (previously Zaire) and Nigeria, which had growth rates of -2.2% and 0.1% respectively for the same period.

To some others, creating a symmetrical linkage between democracy and development is to overburden democracy. Democracy is conceived to be a worthy political project in itself and should not be forcibly associated with economic development. The political context and rights which democracy provides are ends in themselves, which make for human happiness in society. The rights to free speech, association etc, are quite crucial to man and may not necessarily lead to material betterment¹⁰. Detailed empirical studies also show a weak correlation between democracy and development. For example in a statistical study of about 130 countries on the linkage between democracy and development, Svante Ersson and Jan-Erik Lane concluded that there is need for caution in linking democracy with economic development. They assert that the correlation between democracy and economic growth is very weak, so also is the correlation between democracy and income redistribution¹¹. Indeed, Marx Gasiorowski argues that political democracy may have a negative impact on macro-economic performance especially in developing countries. He suggests that democracy engender high inflation rate and slower economic growth in underdeveloped countries as a result of unrestrained competition for resources and pressures for fiscal deficits¹².

As such, the nature of a political regime may not necessarily determine the rate of economic growth and development in a country. Authoritarian regimes in some countries have shown remarkable resilience for economic discipline and structural

reforms, and thereby engineered tremendous economic growth in their countries. The bureaucratic authoritarian model in Latin America in the 1970s and 80s and the developmental authoritarian regimes in East Asia in the 1980s and early 1990s are instructive in this regard. What makes a difference in economic development therefore as Adrian Leftwich argues is not the regime types or mode of political governance, but the nature of the state. According to him, the type of state, whether developmental or not, is quite crucial to the object of economic development¹³. For economic development to take place in a country, the state must be a developmental state. In order to marry the twin goals of democracy and development for Third World countries, what these countries need is a developmental democracy, a democratic state that is also developmental.

Evidently, the relationship between democracy and development is at best a very complex one. Also, there are inherent tensions and contradictions between the two lofty goals. The truth is that there are missing links or gaps between democracy and development, which have to be addressed before the former, can achieve the latter.

Constituting Democracy for Development

There have been dramatic changes on the political scene in Africa, with elections, multipartyism, civil society and human rights as the new political cliches. Most authoritarian regimes have been forced to yield political space and grant civil and political rights to the people. By 1999, three quarter of the countries in Africa has organised national elections mostly on a multiparty basis. The international community has heralded this development as the birth of democracy in Africa. The current tendency is to confuse the form, with the content. Election is largely equated with democracy in Africa. Elections may be a part of, but does not parallel democracy. The over-emphasis on elections has led to an undue exertion of political capital and energies on electoral politics, in which yesterday's tyrants and dictators are gradually devising ingenious means to circumvent the process and reclaim or hold on to political power. This situation, as I argue elsewhere, will once again lead Africa to a political dead-end¹⁴.

In spite of the euphoria of electoral democracy, the economic condition in Africa looks very grim and appalling. Although there are inter-country variations in economic performance in Africa, with some countries as “strong performers” and others as “weak”, the general trend or average performance remains poor. While the growth rate of the GDP for Africa was 2.1% in 1985-1989, this slowed down to 2.0% in the period 1990-1997. The human development index for Africa is not also encouraging. For sub-Saharan Africa, real GDP per capita fell from \$661 in 1980 to \$518 in 1997, while life expectancy at birth is estimated at 48.9 years in 1997. The rate of adult literacy stands at 58.5% in 1997, with only a small percentage of the people having access to safe drinking water, sanitation and good health services¹⁵. The poverty trap is quite daunting that a high percentage of people still live below \$1 per day.

Electoral democracy does not constitute a magic wand for economic progress and social transformation, it is the content of democracy and the way it is constituted that has some implications for the development project. The nature and constitution of democracy determine the extent to which the people participate concretely in decision making, beyond elections, and how their collective efforts influence their life chances. Democracy in its constitutive elements must give practical expression to an organized and predictable life for the people, engender equity and fairness both in power and resource distribution, and facilitate the empowerment of the people. It is through this, that democracy can provide a base or conducive milieu for socio-economic development.

The following elements of democracy have to be taken seriously:

(i). **Constitutionalism and the Rule of law:** The constitution of a country determines the nature of the constitutive and regulative rules for social and political interactions among individual and groups, in a political community. It sets the rules for property rights, the fundamental rights of the citizens, the nature of political authority, etc. The process of engineering that constitution and more importantly, the efforts and strategies at institutionalising it, that is, turning it into a living document is quite crucial to whether democracy will survive in any society. The process of constitutional engineering must not be seen as a purely technical or legalistic affair, but essentially as a political process. It must be thorough, highly inclusive, open and

simple. The document itself must be devoid of complex, bogus and confusing language or *legalese*¹⁶. And before its (i.e. the draft constitution) adoption, it should be subjected to the test of popular will.

Indeed, some may argue that what is the importance of a constitution for a largely illiterate society? Is it more than a worthless document, to be torn apart and abused by the politicians? The importance of a constitution is that it is both a symbolic and practical expression of the social pact between the individual and the state, between the state and groups and among groups or nationalities in a political community. It lays the parameters of power and state institutions, the symmetrical claims and responsibilities of the citizens and the state on each other, and in some cases, regulate the nature of the interactions among groups and nationalities. Without a popular and well-engineered constitution, good governance will depend solely on the benevolence of the leader. However, a good constitution is not enough, it has to be well popularised, with a new culture of the rule of law entrenched in society. This is the only way the led can make their leaders accountable, the leaders can be bound by set rules and governance can proceed in a stable and predictable way. A new civic culture of constitutionalism and the rule of law are germane to a democratic polity and its consolidation.

(ii) **Decentralisation and democratisation of local governance:** Most development literature now emphasizes political decentralisation as an important factor in local empowerment. Decentralisation is viewed as an element that provides sustaining force for political competition at the local level, ensures local accountability and enhances the efficient delivery of local services. However, the decentralisation of power, responsibilities, and resources to the local level, may not necessarily engender good local governance or enhance the involvement of the people in the management of their affairs. It may simply create a local elite or oligarchy, which will corner local power and resources for itself. Decentralisation at the local level must be accompanied by local democratisation. Democratisation at the local level will involve not only local elections, but also the involvement of local interests, groups and civil associations in the process of local governance¹⁷.

(iii) **Citizenship and Rights:** The issue of citizenship and rights is closely tied to the notion of the constitution. Yet, the point needs to be made separately. Citizenship in its instrumentalist form is about social and political equalities and the rights of citizens in a political community¹⁸. For democracy to be meaningful, it has to give expression to both political and socio-economic rights of the citizens. These rights are not to be defined in a hollow sense, to constitute mere “objective principles of state policy”, but should be made enforceable and justiceable rights of the citizens.

However, these rights, especially socio-economic rights need to be negotiated by the people through the constitutional design process, given due cognisance to the resource profile of the country. Liberal democracy especially as it canvassed for Third World countries weighs high in the claim for civil and political rights, but very silent, if not against socio-economic rights. A tenuous argument often advanced is that most developing countries are poor, and cannot afford to grant those rights. Doing so, will amount to succumbing to “cheap populist policies” that would be heinous to economic growth. The truth is that the issue of resources is closely related to that of priorities. While many countries in Africa hardly find resources to meet social goals for their people, they readily mobilise scarce resources to fight wars. The provision for and enforcement of socio-economic rights has the benefit of reducing social inequalities, reducing political tension in society and increasing the pool of democratic stake-holders in the society. Its economic development impact may also be profound.

The Missing Link Between Democracy and Development

The constitution of a democratic polity even in the most benign form may not necessarily engender economic development in a country. It may promote social progress, but not necessarily rapid economic growth. This is because there are intervening variables between democracy and economic growth. The intervening variables, which I have identified in this regard, especially for developing countries, are basically three. These are; the character of the state, the nature of economic policies, and the external dimensions impacting on the local economy. I will discuss those issues quite briefly:

(i) **The State:** The poor economic performance of the state in Africa especially with the dawn of the global economic recession from the 1970s, has over-shadowed its initial stride in economic growth and social development. Various adjectives have been adopted to qualify it. “overbloated”, “parasitic”, “lame”, “hanging”, “roguery”, “expired”, and “criminal” state. Indeed, the study of the state in Africa has become an academic industry on its own, with little efforts in most of those studies to point to the way forward for the African state. The international community guided by the product of those scholarships mostly manufactured in the West, and also the changing global political economy, called for drastic refashioning of the African state. The African state became the object of punitive actions. The state was to be cut off almost completely from the economy to be a “night watch guard”. All its facets were to be streamlined and disciplined, to make it functional. Its financial profile was to be heavily tightened, its bureaucracy subjected to drastic reforms in size and method, its public enterprises sold off, regulatory role over the economy highly curtailed, and its mandate to provide social welfare reduced. In the process, the African state became an object of what Thandika Mkandawire refers to as “maladjustment”¹⁹.

While it is true that the state in Africa needs urgent reforms, the question is: what kind of reforms does it need to make it an agent of development? How is the state in Africa to be reconstituted to serve as a bridge between democracy and development? What Africa needs is what has been aptly described as a developmental state²⁰. A developmental state is that which is essentially nationalistic in orientation and sets as its primacy the task of development. It is a state that must be able to facilitate rapid process of capital accumulation and industrialisation, while not compromising the goal of social welfare for the people. Such a state must possess two features. It must have relative autonomy, so that it is able to act independently of contending social forces, and also must enjoy legitimacy. The latter implies the democratic content of such state.

The construction of a developmental state has two dimensions- structural and process. The structural dimension involves the construction of a strong bureaucracy and state institutions that will have the capacity to analyse manage and implement economic policies effectively and forge a cordial relationship with the private sector in the process of economic growth. The process dimension involves the cultivation of a

developmental elite who has commitment to the process of national development. Such an elite will have a strong faith in the rule of law, and provides a pro-investment economic climate. The economic environment should be highly supportive of local investors and businessmen, while also encouraging foreign capital. Its capacity to monitor and regulate the economy should also be highly enhanced.

While it may be difficult to construct road maps about how a development state is to be achieved in Africa, the logic and principles of it can set the basis for its realisation in various forms in the respective countries.

(ii) **Economic Policies:** In the context of economic globalisation and deep economic crisis, the state in Africa seems to have lost complete initiative and direction on domestic economic policies, to external forces. The emphasis of policies adopted by most African countries is on engineering structural reforms in the economy. The neo-liberal macro-economic reforms in trade and tariff regimes, social sector, exchange rate, fiscal and financial management, are aimed at achieving rapid economic growth. However, those policies fall short on social development. The assumption is that economic growth will spin off social progress for society. Distribution cannot be possible without accumulation, the thinking goes. But the goals of economic growth, equity, and social welfare, are mutually reinforcing elements of economic development. They are not to be trade-off for one another.

While post-colonial gains in social development in most African countries have suffered drastic setback in the last two decades²¹, steady economic growth has equally not been achieved. On both counts, Africa has been worse off than before. Evidently, there is need to review the approach to economic policy design in Africa, from a general framework and standard policy package, to a closer understanding of local economic peculiarities. In other words, macro-economic policies must largely be locally driven and flexible enough to accommodate changes and dynamics in the local economy. It is then that local input and ownership could be promoted. Those two elements are key to the success of any economic policy. The whole logic of democracy is not only about abstract political rights, but inputs into economic decisions that affect the lives of the people. As Tajudeen Abdul Raheem noted “what kind of democracy/development are we promoting that gives me the right to choose

leaders but denies me the right to participation in the economic policies of the country”²².

While structural reforms may be necessary in the economies of African countries, it must be such that balance of goals of economic growth, human development and income redistribution in society, grounded in local initiative, ownership and management. The complementary efforts of the international community in Africa’s economic process may center on capacity building for economic policy making and management, through training programmes for state personnel in technical, administrative and management areas, and on the flow of investment resources to Africa.

External Dimensions Impacting on the Local Economy: The greatest threat to the economic survival of most African countries currently is not so much with their increasing marginalisation in the global economy, but the excruciating issue of the external debt. The debt profile of Africa is greater than her total economic output. In 1999, Africa’s external debt was estimated at \$227 billion. The aggregate ratio of debt to export was estimated at 239.9% in 1996²³. The ratio of debt to GNP in countries like Mauritania, Mali, Mozambique, and Ghana was 235%, 119%, 233%, and 89% respectively in 1997²⁴. The problem of debt servicing leaves little margin for investment resources.

Already some initiative on debt relief for countries classified as heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) had began since 1995 by the World Bank. Four-fifth of these countries is in sub-Saharan Africa. Three years after the programme commenced, four countries (Bolivia, Uganda, Guyana and Mozambique) have benefited from it. And it is expected that by the year 2000 three other African countries- Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, and Mali would also benefit. In all, a sum of \$3 billion will have been redeemed as debt relief for those seven countries, out of a total of \$127 billion owed by the HIPC²⁵.

The debt relief programme of the World Bank and the IMF is commendable, as more resources would be freed for socio-economic development in the countries affected, however, the effort seems a little too small and a little too slow to arrest the current

drift of development in Africa. More countries should be included in the scheme and the size of the debt to be redeemed through the process should be more. For example, in the case of Mozambique, as the UNDP shows, while the debt service payment of the country before the HIPC initiative was \$153million annually, the original debt relief initiative in 1996 reduced it to \$98million, while the enhanced HIPC further reduced it to \$73million. The current debt service payment of the country still far exceeds the total public expenditure on education and health²⁶. There is need to address the debt issue in a more comprehensive manner, if the hope of economic development is to materialise in Africa.

Conclusion

The issue as Akwasi Aidoo rightly noted is not whether Africa will survive²⁷. Obviously, the continent will certainly do, if the World survives. However, the pertinent question is; what shape and form will the survival take? The twin elements of democracy and development should serve as the key to a prosperous future for Africa. A democracy not conceived only in terms of elections and abstract political rights, but one in which constitutionalism and the rule of law are institutionalised, political, social and economic rights well protected, and in which the people have real decision making powers beyond the realm of voting.

The relationship between democracy and economic development is complex and varied. And there may be tensions and contradictions between the two projects. Yet, when the former is well constituted and institutionalised, it may serve as the base or political infrastructure on which the foundation of the latter may be constructed. The missing links by which democracy may rapidly facilitate economic development include the character of the state, the nature of economic policies pursued, and external pressures on the economy either in terms of the debt problem or the marginalising pressures of globalisation on trade and investment by the less developing countries.

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- ³ . Said Adejumobi, "Reconstructing The Future: Africa and the Challenge of Democracy and Good Governance in The 21st Century", *Development and Socio-Economic Progress*. No. 75. January/June 1999. P.34.
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¹⁸ . See, S. Adejumobi, "Citizenship, Rights and the Problem of Conflicts and Civil Wars in Africa" *Paper Presented to the Norwegian Nobel Institute Seminar* , Oslo, Norway, May, 2000.

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²¹ . See, S. Adejumobi, "Privatisation Policy, and the Delivery of Social Welfare Services in Africa: A Nigerian Example" *Journal of Social Development in Africa*. Vol.14, No.2, 1999, pp. 87-108.

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²⁵ . See, UNDP, *Poverty Report*, 2000, p.46.

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