



# Misrepresentations of democracy: The widening gap between Africa and its potential

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## Abstract

Africa's inglorious past has often been misinterpreted as evidence of an inevitable underdeveloped present and future. Slavery and colonialism imposed devastating socio-political and economic burdens on the continent. Speculations about pre-colonial Africa as mired in Hobbesian-like conditions were a pretext used to rationalize colonialism. Agitations for independence popularized democracy. Democracy's true essence lies in recognizing the people as both the sacrosanct means and ultimate end of governance. Of deep concern are the misrepresentations of democracy in many nations of the West, Central, East, North, and South Africa. Fanaticism about ethnicity, religion, and self remains an underlying factor. This paper reveals that the challenge is not one of theory but practice. Contrary to condescending outlooks from non-Africans and Africans, it argues that Africa is neither fated to be underdeveloped nor are African countries destined to be the least among equals. It encompasses a cross-regional analysis of democratic attitudes and practices in order to achieve a more holistic perspective. This analytical and evaluative approach has been crucial. This research finds that Africa possesses intellectual, socio-political, and economic capacity for transformation. Visionary and proactive leadership are reliable midwives for a shift away from inordinate dependence on developed nations toward intentional partnerships that serve each

African nation's interests most effectively. Hence, the study posits that Africa can and should move from surviving to thriving.

**Keywords:** Africa, democracy, development, politics

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## Introduction

'History is boring,' some minds declare. They risk missing the connections that can make a remarkable difference in comprehension or in finding a solution, often without realizing it. To underestimate Africa is to reveal either ignorance of historical records that show dramatic reversals of fortunes in nations and continents or a penchant for delusion. Slavery and its modern extension, neo-slavery or colonialism, hit Africa hard; the reverberations are felt to this day. There have often been insinuations that many African states, post-colonialism, were deliberately configured to continue serving colonial interests after independence. This reality partly explains the reservations some hold regarding the adoption of democracy. Democracy as a system of government is inherently good in itself; the problem is that acclaimed democratic African nations prefer to distort or misrepresent it in practice. The ripple effect is underdevelopment, evidenced in wobbly economies, inadequate basic amenities, and low standards of living at

the grassroots level.

This paper attempts to highlight democratic distortions and their attendant consequences in western, central, eastern, northern, and southern Africa, demonstrating that these issues are man-made and therefore surmountable. What emerges is a clear departure from long-held notions of Africa as destined for weakness, poverty, and subservience. The focus on so-called democratic nations across Africa is pursued through an analytical and evaluative approach. This research finds that rudderless governments across Africa can be held accountable and redirected through visionary and proactive leadership. Africa's abundant socio-political, intellectual, and economic prospects should ensure that significant opportunities exist for the continent's sustainable development.

## Transition from colonialism to independence

Unlike most continents, Africa has had a troubled past in which its relegation to second-class status at home was

compounded by foreign exploitation. This dominance of African territories came with far-reaching political and economic consequences. The nineteenth century saw the widespread forfeiture of political and economic control to foreign powers under coercion. The Berlin conference of 1885 opened this floodgate of sophisticated slavery, as humans trade grew obsolete. Rodney (1981) noted that "in the period of the notorious 'Scramble for Africa,' Europeans made a grab for whatever they thought spelt profit in Africa, and they even consciously acquired many areas not for immediate exploitation but with an eye to the future. Each European nation that had these short-term and long-term economic interests ran up its own flag in different parts of Africa and established colonial rule" (p. 137). Africa was objectified, her value tied to being a means to an end that mostly favoured Western nations. Any resistance, whether from African leaders or security forces, was matched with deposition in the former, decimation in the latter. The bloody 1895 invasion of the Benin kingdom by Britain comes to mind. The strategic deployment of European forces across the continent heralded the age of colonialism, which further legitimized and deepened their control over Africa's human and material resources. States

were run purposefully to culminate in this agenda. The agendas of Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, and others prevailed across West, East, Central, North and South Africa. Africa was deemed a goldmine, one that centuries of slave trade and resource extraction had yet to exhaust.

Meanwhile, Africa's current catalogue of development challenges is often misused to suggest that the continent was inherently backwards in the pre-slavery and pre-colonial eras, necessitating intervention. Such a narrative is historically inaccurate. "Oyo and Benin were great long before making contact with Europeans, and while both Dahomey and Asante grew stronger during the period of the European slave trade, the roots of their achievements went back to much earlier years" (Rodney, 1981, p.102). Thus, Africa was already on a developmental trajectory—albeit not at the same level as Europe's—with positive prospects prior to colonial intrusion. This external influence deeply affected existing socio-cultural systems, eroding cherished values and norms that still struggle to recover today. Thus, Africa was already on a development trajectory, albeit not much in the same level as Europe's, with positive prospects prior to colonial intrusion. This external influence

deeply affected existing socio-cultural systems, eroding cherished values and norms that still struggle to recover today. Kwasi Wiredu (1998, pp. 17-46) observed that "colonialism was not only a political imposition, but also a cultural one". Attempts by colonizers to give their reign a democratic face, through the introduction of suffrage, parliaments, appointment of Africans into high offices, were ultimately a veneer intended to perpetuate foreign interests. In the early twentieth century, a growing political consciousness emerged among Africans, particularly within the educated class, on the need to reclaim control of their fatherland through diplomacy. Kwame Nkrumah, Nnamdi Azikiwe, Obafemi Awolowo, Tafawa Balewa, Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, among others, were the central figures in the historic fight towards the independence of many African countries.

The mid-twentieth century saw waves of national independence or return to self-rule sweep through diverse parts of Africa, leading to the departure of Western nations from the continent in its wake. Noteworthy is that these colonialists bade African states farewell, but not totally, as vestiges of their influence remained, preserving the interests in former colonies. This new

dawn highlighted the need for a viable system of government to pace African countries on a path of self-engineered prosperity. Democracy emerged as a popular option and was widely adopted. Larry Diamond (1988, p.1) asserts, "since the wave of decolonization following World War II, a number of Third World nations, most of them former British colonies, have attempted to govern themselves through Western-style democratic institutions." At the time, such emulation seemed an excellent idea. It encouraged power brokers to relinquish control and appeared to empower the African masses to play a central role in democratic governance. But what does democracy truly mean? What essential elements signify its presence in a state?

### **Essence of democracy**

Going beyond what people generally think democracy is marks the beginning of an informed inquiry into the concept. Seeking democracy's essence deepens this investigation, revealing its foundational nature upon which valid interpretations are built. In philosophical terms, this is referred to as the ontology of democracy; an exploration of its origin, conceptual scope, and practical limitations. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt (2018) argue that democracy is a system of government in which a people-oriented

constitution is underpinned by norms of mutual toleration and forbearance. A constitution, being a written, somewhat comprehensive document on the framework and laws of a political entity, establishes the arms and tiers of government that maintain order and enable progress. These structures, alongside other consequential institutions, need to operate within an environment where competing political parties, during and after elections, are able to agree to disagree without descending into war-like acrimony.

Vincent Ostrom (1997, p.3) explained that "What it means to live in a democratic society is much more demanding than electing representatives who form governments. Not only are democratic societies constructed around the essential place of citizens in those societies, but they cannot be maintained without the knowledge, moral integrity, skill, and intelligibility of citizens in the cultivation of those societies" Contrary to the tendency to deify government due to enormous power it received through elections, Ostrom's perspective emphasizes the people as pioneers and custodians of democracy by virtue of their lifestyle, not merely through legal obligation. Their daily decisions, actions serve to promote democracy,

demonstrating the internalization of democratic norms. For "democratic ways of life turn on self-organizing and self-governing capabilities rather than presuming that something called "the Government" governs" (Ostrom, 1997, p.3-4).

Furthermore, Aristotle—one of the foremost pioneer theorists of democracy—had a less flowery and optimistic perception of the term than what is commonly obtainable today. For Aristotle, democracy is a deviation from a "constitution" or governmental system known as "polity." He identified other deviations, such as "tyranny" (the worst form) and "oligarchy" (a worse form), in contrast to the best system, "kingship," and the second-best, "aristocracy." Aristotle argued that the crux of government lies in its promotion of public good, a basis for grading these three frameworks. Kingship involves rule by one, aristocracy by a few, and polity by the many. In contrast, democracy, as a deviation, involves rule by the many whose governance is driven by self-interest rather than the common good. He considered democracy to be bad, though the least harmful among the deviations, because it nevertheless prioritizes the peculiar interests of the majority over only those of either a king

or oligarchs. Basically, "A democracy exists whenever those who are free and are not well-off, being in the majority, are in sovereign control of government." (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E/1981, p.245).

Informed by observation of the workings of the United States government in the nineteenth century and its democratic practice, Alexis de Tocqueville (1835/2000) argued that democracy is a system in which the people, not one or a select few, govern on the basis of equality. In such a system, institutions are constituted by officials chosen without regard for preferential factors and policies are designed to blur social status lines in the distribution of benefits. For Tocqueville, equality precedes freedom, and the exercise of freedom culminates in equality. Tocqueville (1835/2000, p.116) posited:

It is not that peoples whose social state is democratic naturally scorn freedom; on the contrary, they have an instinctive taste for it. But freedom is not the principal and continuous object of their desire; what they love with an eternal love is equality; they dash toward freedom with a rapid impulse and sudden efforts, and if they miss the goal they resign themselves; but nothing can

satisfy them without equality and they would sooner consent to perish than to lose it.

Thus, the *summum bonum* (ultimate good) of democracy is equality. A state is described as democratic when the rights of every citizen are equal and upheld.

Joseph Schumpeter, skeptical of the democratic claims made by proponents of Marxian socialism, emphasized that democracy is not an end in itself but a means to a potential ideal, namely socialism. This transition is to be shaped by democratic procedures, not by a bloody revolution which would undermine democratic practice *ab initio*. Schumpeter (1976, p.269) contended "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." Government policies and state laws constitute these "political decisions" whose purpose is to foster the wellbeing of the people. The "competitive struggle" connotes periodical elections where voters choose those to be in the frontline. For him, societal realities, neither preconceptions nor enunciations, reveal democracy's true meaning. And his

explanation "greatly improves the theory of the democratic process."

Frank Cunningham (2002) lauded the democratic viewpoints of Aristotle, Tocqueville and Schumpeter. However, it also highlighted the flaws inherent in them. He argued that "tacit" accommodation of racism and sexism in Aristotle and Tocqueville's ideas, respectively, were their shortcomings. Their standpoints condoned slavery, an institutionalized attack on human dignity and relegation of women to the background in politics in a democratic state. Cunningham contended that holding on to these classical perspectives amounts to an exercise in anachronism, as they hold more historical than contemporary. Furthermore, he criticized Schumpeter's conception of democracy as "sparse" and accused it of "glossing over" crucial issues of racial, social, and gender disenfranchisement, thereby undermining a democratic culture.

Thus, democracy is fundamentally about the people—the masses, the ordinary citizens—who serve as both the foundation and the pinnacle of any governmental system. Their existence necessitates a grand structure—comprising institutions developed with precision to promote different degrees of public interests, to improve and sustain

their welfare. Domestic and foreign policies are tailored for, not against, the people. Laws, statutes, standard operating procedures, elections, appointments, political parties, and coalitions all exist and gain legitimacy because of the people. Etymologically, the word democracy, from "demos" meaning people and "kratein" meaning rule, gives this view additional credence. In fact, a recurring theme in the various theoretical conceptualizations of democracy is the central role of the people. There is unanimity regarding the people as the soul of democracy, but divergence occurs on the form it assumes or should assume. Answers to how, who, where, and when this plays out remain controversial.

However, democracy is a system of government in which the people periodically elect representatives who creatively formulate policies, enact laws, and appoint custodians to promote the common good in a sustainable manner. This conception makes room for election, ingenuity in policy and law-making, incorporation of the judiciary, and benefits for citizens that stand the test of time. Democracy can be understood as a cyclical process: it begins with the people, is mediated by elected leaders and institutions, and ultimately aims to enhance the quality of life of the

populace indefinitely. The democratic process is incomplete if any of these elements is missing. This view envisages a contrary end-justifies-the-means argument, and contending that promoting the common good alone is unlikely to be sustainable without credible elections and robust institutions to maintain and safeguard progress. Examining how countries on the African continent have fared in embracing and implementing the democratic spirit prevalent in other parts of the world is, therefore, a worthwhile endeavour.

### **Democracy in Africa**

From the mid-twentieth century, when the independence of African countries reached its crescendo, to date, there has been a proportional increase in democracy's adoption across the continent. Part of the contentions tabled by nationalists before colonial powers was a preparedness to have ordinary indigenes play central roles in the next political dispensation. The people would step in to fuel the formation of government in an ambience of accountability, while their political and civil rights remain intact. In Western Africa, at Nigeria's independence in 1960, "the tone of optimism and hope was echoed as well by foreigners, especially the British, who took considerable pride

in leaving behind a functioning parliamentary democracy" (Diamond, 1988, pp. 64-65). The prevailing understanding was that democracy would be carried on and refined with time. But has this truly been the case in Africa's most populous nation? A categorical answer in the affirmative is either delusional or a defensive effort by beneficiaries of the democratic disorder.

Disunity, distrust among political class members and between the armed forces led to the fall of the First Republic in 1966. Nigeria's incipient democracy collapsed, ushering in a series of military interregnums. It was in a coma until 1979, when a government emerged partly through a democratic process. This recovery was short-lived, as it was derailed in 1983 and did not resume until sixteen years later. Although there has been no extra-democratic disruption since 1999, the same cannot be said of Nigeria's representation or the quality of its democracy. Attempts at a democratic system over the past sixty years have been undermined by oligarchy, corruption, short-sightedness, erosion of the rule of law, ethno-religious bias, unfulfilled promises, intolerance, and election rigging. The persistence of such systemic failure is disturbing. Chinua Achebe (2012, p.241) observed:



We were plagued by a homegrown enemy: the political ineptitude, mediocrity, indiscipline, ethnic bigotry, and corruption of the ruling class. Compounding the situation was the fact that Nigeria was now awash in oil-boom petrodollars, and to make matters even worse, the country's young, affable, military head of state, General Yakubu Gowon, ever so cocksure following his victory, proclaimed to the entire planet that Nigeria had more money than it knew what to do with. A new era of great decadence and decline was born. It continues to this day.

It seems these issues evolve with severity, considering the increasingly sophisticated strategies employed by many political actors to bypass democratic safeguards and serve their own interests. Presently, Nigeria's security, economy, education, and health sectors are faltering, not due to inadvertent factors but actions and inactions of its political leaders. There are credible concerns that elements within the executive may be complicit in perpetuating the deadly Boko Haram insurgency and widespread banditry. The legislature's reluctance to hold the executive accountable further edges the

nation toward anarchy. Meanwhile, many high-profile treasury looters receive lenient treatment from the judiciary, often for reasons that appear legally and morally indefensible... It is clear that ordinary Nigerians are not being prioritized in their country's running, a stark misrepresentation of democratic ideals.

In Central Africa, after securing independence from Portugal in 1975, Angolans began a new chapter with a sense of optimism. Democracy, it seemed, had come home. José Eduardo Dos Santos took over the reins as president in 1979. However, this hope soon gave way to despair as he monopolized power, repressed opposition, colluded with legislators to extend his tenure, manipulated elections, and ruled for nearly four decades before stepping down in 2017. He passed away in 2022. Despite Angola's status as one of the world's leading crude oil exporters, this wealth has had minimal impact on the living standards of ordinary Angolans. Instead, the country's oil wealth largely circulated within the inner circle of former president Dos Santos, namely his family, some businessmen, and some army generals. As Birmingham (2006, p.160) notes: "The big story, which has run and run, is 'Who are the richest men in

Angola?' The names and photographs of the fifty-nine top candidates are now very much in the public domain. Each is allegedly worth more than fifty million United States dollars, some of them more than one hundred million".

Moves by the press to perform its statutory role of critique in freedom did not go unhindered. Nonetheless, the press remained democracy's final line of defence, bringing the awareness of the merciless plunder of the Angolans' common wealth to them. As Birmingham (2006, p.161) notes, "The destination of Angola's three billion dollars' worth of missing oil earnings is one of the fascinating facets of a new stirring of public awareness" At this time, the democratic pursuit of the common good had reached a low ebb. Poverty and underdevelopment continue to ravage Angola to date. Living in poverty amidst immense national wealth remains one of the nation's most painful contradictions. Although the former vice-president and current President Joao Lourenco, handpicked by his predecessor, seems to be championing an anti-corruption fight mainly targeted at the Eduardo Dos Santos family to recover lost national wealth, in a bid to recover stolen public funds, there are growing speculations that this effort may be driven by an

ulterior motive: to consolidate his own power and eliminate opposition. Whether the 2022 general elections in Angola met democratic standards remains a subject of debate.

In Eastern Africa, Rwanda has had a rollercoaster ride from independence in 1962 to the present. The Hutu and Tutsi ethnic rivalry permeated its politics before and after Belgium left, leaving Rwanda deeply divided. This unhealthy competition pushed the nation to pay a steep price, millions of deaths, and caused it to begin on an autocratic note, despite earlier nationalistic agitations for a people-oriented government by indigenes. The situation was akin to Burundi's *status quo*. Of Hutu extraction, President Habyarimana's emergence in 1973 tore Rwanda apart further with his leadership prejudice of the Hutu majority and superiority. Tutsis were oppressed with impunity. Though his regime succumbed to international and local pressure to run a democratic government with a multi-party system in 1991, the political parties formed had strong ethnic undertones, which eventually plunged the nation into an unprecedented Hutu-orchestrated genocide from April 7 to July 15 in 1994, leaving over four hundred thousand Tutsis dead. Michael Mann (2005, p.440) maintained:

The political pressures came from the collapse of Communism across the world, increasing pressures for Western-style democratization. The Burundian and Rwandan regimes – under domestic pressure anyway – both conceded ground, allowing other parties to organize for elections. As I have emphasized, democracy can encourage ethnic tensions and violence if political parties organize by ethnicity.

We are reminded again that democracy cannot survive without the support of objective and solid institutions. There are indications that the ethnic cleansing was planned by the Hutu-led Rwandan government over time. These presented a graphic image of an extreme antithesis to democracy. Although the Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), comprising Tutsis in exile, intervened to quell the massacre and seized power, the restoration of democracy in Rwanda remains commendable in theory but questionable in practice. President Paul Kagame has held sway in Rwanda for multiple tenures spanning over two decades, unwilling to leave office since 1998. The conduct of elections, wherein opposition parties and candidates are systematically undermined, seems configured to

entrench him in power during each electoral cycle. Critics in the country risk a jail term. "This form of intimidation undermines the development of contested forms of democracy but allows political actors to maintain a situation with a veneer of calm, and does not impact negatively on the indicators of economic development" (Marriage, 2016, p.52). Arguments justifying the suppression of government opposition on the premise of preventing a recurrence of the events leading to the 1994 tragedy are highly contestable.

In Northern Africa, Sudan's democratic culture over the years sparks reservations. Introduction of a parliamentary governmental system after independence in 1956, mirroring the British Westminster style, was beset by tribalism and religious fanaticism. The duopoly of the Ummah Party and National Unionist Party was enabled by the influences of the Mahdiyyah and Khatmiyyah ethnic groups, respectively. Electoral campaigns prioritized ethnic allegiances over substantive policy debates, reducing the political arena to a contest of identity rather than ideas. Common good becomes nebulous when ethnic good precedes it. Despite Sudan being multi-religious—Muslims, Christians, and animists making up the population—the

Muslim majority attempted to make the country an Islamic state, in spite of resistance from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM). That this agenda has been pursued, That this agenda has been pursued, sometimes through democratic means, is troubling. John Esposito and John Voll (1996, p.94) observed:

For a short time the NIF had been part of a coalition government, but most of the time it was in opposition. It did not advocate the overthrow of the system, but rather maintained its pressure for the continuation of the implementation of the Shariah within the framework of the parliamentary system. Its long-term strategy continued to rely on the importance of the Islamization of society as the precursor to the establishment of an Islamic state. It remained pragmatic in terms of tactics, operating within the ground rules of multiparty parliamentary politics.

The efforts of the National Islamic Front (NIF), Hasan Al-Turabi, Omar Bashir and National Salvation Revolution (NSR) in consultations, resolutions, legislations and elections significantly misrepresent

democracy. It is ironic that Hasan Al-Turabi, a foremost leader of NIF and preacher of an Islamized Sudan, devoted himself to researching democracy during his doctorate degree sojourn abroad. In practice, however, democracy appeared to be more of a rhetorical commitment than a functional reality. Though he advocated abrogation of ethnic politics and associated party formations, he remained firmly committed to making Sudan an Islamic. Evaluating this position, W. J. Berridge (2017, p.245) argued that "another major problem is that al-Turabi went beyond arguing that Islam was compatible with democracy to claiming that Islam was the source of democracy." Most Islamists in the country assert that Islam and democracy are mutually inclusive but they maintain that the latter functions merely as a tool subordinate to the former. This mirrors the medieval period when Christianity held supreme authority across Europe, often dictating the parameters of political legitimacy.

Lastly, in Southern Africa, South Africa has never breached democracy. The apartheid regime, until its end in 1994, wore a democratic mask. Elections held, legislation passed, a parliament alongside a constitution existed, but all were underpinned by institutionalized racism.

Black indigenes were disenfranchised, excluded, dehumanized and oppressed with reckless abandon. The whites dominated, blacks subordinated. State authorities stood applauding. Nigel Worden (2012, pp.105-106) emphasized "White political monopoly of power was further tightened in the early 1950s. The advisory Native Representative Council, set up in 1936, was abolished. The Bantu Authorities Act (1951) replaced it with government-approved chiefs in the reserves, but made no provision for the representation of Africans in the towns and 'white' rural areas." Nelson Mandela, alongside like-minded compatriots, displayed remarkable courage in resisting this democratic anomaly and sought to reverse the tide, paying heavy personal costs in the process. Mandela's decision to leave office after one term as president under the African National Congress (ANC) party further solidified his legacy as a great democrat, whose name evokes reverence globally to date.

Delight in this new dispensation requires vigilance to match it. True, ANC was pivotal to bulldozing the apartheid government and deserves accolades. However, the party's long dominance of the nation's political space and low accommodation of opposition pose a threat to democracy's sustainability.

"While there appears to be no real threat to democracy in South Africa, it does face several challenges over the coming years, and successful democratic consolidation will depend upon alertness to the emergence of the undemocratic features frequently associated with dominant party systems" (Brooks, 2004, pp.1-24). Nevertheless, the presence of some flaws in Africa's history and democracy does not negate the fact of its robust prospects.

### **Africa's potential**

With a history of slavery and colonialism, and neo-colonialism persisting today, many foreigners and a good number of Africans tend to write off Africa's future. Unfortunately, many of these Africans adopt this stance due to distorted, slavish ideas and orientations they have assimilated; this creates a subservient and dependent populace, ready to promote foreign interests even at the cost of their wellbeing. Today, Africa's democratic systems falter due to a litany of African leaders who share this philosophy and have a poor vision of where the continent should be. Few Africans have been able to extricate themselves from the dungeon of misguided followers who believe in their inherent inferiority compared to Westerners and a destiny of mediocrity;

this includes some members of the educated class. "By Westernizing Africa, certainly, as noted hereinabove, Europe destroyed important African institutions, systems and ways of life. This has a lot of ramifications, such as a lack of confidence, creating animosity among Africans, exploitation, colonialism, divisions and weakening the fabric of what used to hold Africa together" (Mhango, 2018, p.30). Genuine knowledge of what Africa has and could be is critical to taking the continent to higher levels of progress.

Kwame Nkrumah (1963, p.108) contended that "once political independence has been achieved, the country's full potential can, and must, be explored" Toeing this line is indeed possible. These potentialities range from human to material; the human dimension comprises great socio-political and intellectual prospects in Africa. Socio-politically, African countries have the capacity to run a people-centred democratic government that mostly pursues the common good. Assertions that pre-slavery and pre-colonial Africa was crude and crass in political affairs are misleading; it was a premise devised to rationalize external invasion. "Accepting that Africa was *terra nullius* or No Man's Land means saving those

who robbed it from facing criminal liability resulting from the plunderage they committed" (Mhango, 2018, p.38). In fact, in most parts of Africa, there were monarchical, aristocratic and democratic structures that existed, complete with defined forms of ascension and administration that ensured order and prosperity of communities and polities.

In Ancient Egypt, there was a monarchical system of government led by a Pharaoh alongside his advisers. Typically, Pharaohs ascended to power through hereditary succession and ruled for life in an ascribed divine status. "Indeed, as a form of government, kingship was quintessentially Egyptian. Among the early civilizations of the ancient world, only Egypt embraced this particular mode of rule from the very beginning of its history" (Wilkinson, 2010, p.51). Pharaohs oversaw Egypt's day-to-day running, making and implementing policies, enacting laws and administering justice. Although there were instances of tyranny, the pharaonic government provided direction to Egypt, culminating in its position as a prosperous world power millennia ago. An African country can be a world power again if its leaders dream big enough and pursue that vision consistently.

Similarly, the Ashanti or Asante people of Ghana in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century had a political order headed by a king, Asantehene, who was charged with securing their society's common good. King Osei Tutu masterminded the victory in battle against the Denkyira colonizers, ensuring self-government for the Ashantis. A sacred golden stool was introduced to corroborate the divine kingship status of present and subsequent kings to date. The city of Kumasi in Ghana was the Ashanti kingdom's capital. Amazingly, this Ashanti political structure was complemented by aristocratic and democratic elements, a council of chiefs and a council of youths, which served to check a king's excesses and prioritized the masses' wellbeing. "Scholars of Ashanti history, such as Larry Yarak and Ivor Wilkes, disagree over the actual power of this sophisticated bureaucracy in comparison to the Asantahene, but agree that its very existence pointed to a highly developed government with a complex system of checks and balances" (Miller, Vandrome and McBrewster, 2009, p.37). This example demonstrates that African countries have the capacity to operate and thrive under democratic systems.

Again, the Igbo people of Nigeria were disinclined to an absolute monarchy and preferred a constitutional version in which the powers of one at the helm of affairs were decentralized and subject to challenge. Aristotle would grin with satisfaction at such grit to prevent the degeneration of kingship to tyranny. The prominent role of a council of elders in pre-colonial Igbo societies helped to balance governance and ward off despotism. Chinua Achebe (2012, p.243) highlighted:

The Igbo are a very democratic people. The Igbo people expressed a strong antimonarchy sentiment—Ezebuilo—which literally means, a king is an enemy. Their culture illustrates a clear-cut opposition to kings, because, I think, the Igbo people had seen what the uncontrolled power of kings could do. There is no doubt that in their history they experienced the high-handedness of kings, so they decided that a king cannot be a trusted friend of the people without checks and balances.

Thus, Africans had a sense of government formations, including democratic ones to some extent, before colonialists showed up. It is arguable that democracy as a

governmental system wasn't invented by Westerners or Europeans, as many suppose. Absence of the word "democracy" in ancient African contexts doesn't logically imply the absence of democratic practice. Like all systems of government, democracy has undergone an upward evolution over the years. Indeed, many African countries are yet to fully integrate their core principles, but this setback is surmountable.

Intellectually, exceptional minds abound in Africa. This is evident in some inventions facilitated by Africans and enjoyed globally today. The idea of a nation-state, or country, was introduced by the first dynasty of ancient Egypt almost five thousand years ago. Prior to this, what existed were dense familial groups and small ethnic communities. Egypt, comprising its lower and upper parts, successfully amalgamated these groups to form a unified nation. It blazed the trail in instilling a sense of citizenship and patriotic consciousness. Toby Wilkinson (2010, p.51) posited:

The unification of Egypt in 2950 created the world's first nation-state. Today, this form of political and social unit seems both natural and inevitable: our prosperity (or poverty), our rights and duties, our freedoms (or lack

of them) are all profoundly affected by our nationality. With the exception of Antarctica, the entire surface of our planet is divided up into countries, numbering more than two hundred. Yet it was not always so. Before the late fourth millennium B.C., there were no such states. Identity and loyalty were based instead on family, community, or region. The concept of a nation-state—a political territory whose population shares a common identity—was the invention of the ancient Egyptians

This is a timely reminder to Africans that they have the capacity to initiate and execute unprecedented ideas capable of setting our planet on a fresh, advanced path. Creating enabling environments that ignite and breed such ingenuity cannot be overemphasized. Furthermore, Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize in literature is a testament to Africa's bright future in the academic world. For an award once won by Albert Einstein—arguably one of the greatest minds ever—in the physics category, great intellectual distinction is required to scoop it. Although Wole Soyinka downplayed obsession with the prize and narrated in his 2006 memoir of



being "placid" when the good news filtered in, his victory remains inspirational. The event reiterates this timeless truth: If Africans sharpen their intellect, they can as well break grounds in literature, engineering, medicine, mathematics, arts, philosophy, technology and so on. Incredible possibilities await Africans.

Another pointer to Africa's intellectual potential is the brain-drain syndrome and its astonishing aftermath abroad. Many African students pass through higher institutions to study different arts and science courses crucial to different national development, but are typically undermined by systemic failures. African prodigies, who receive short-lived eulogies, only to be abandoned, are not exempted. The precedence of nepotism and mediocrity over meritocracy, coupled with poor governmental prioritization, Precedence of nepotism and mediocrity over meritocracy coupled with poor governmental prioritization, limits the integration of these intellectual assets into African systems for sustainable growth.

In many cases, those who are absorbed suffer poor remuneration and welfare, as opposed to government officials who revel in their exorbitant compensations. Dejene Adredo (2000, p.122) contended

"developing countries suffer from a low level of investment in human capital, aggravated by massive outflow of the little skilled manpower they have trained using scarce domestic resources."

Lecturers, doctors, nurses, engineers, information technologists, lawyers, writers, philosophers, psychologists and so on, are leaving Africa in large numbers. Bearing in mind Nigeria's Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU) over seven months strike in 2022, the Nigerian and similarly culpable African governments need to realize:

For a university to generate knowledge and transmit same, it must have its pool of talent and students who must interact in the process of teaching, learning and research. Hence human resources (lecturers and students) constitute very important inputs in this process. This combination is critical because it has a structural and significant relationship with the society's capacity to innovate and manage its present and future development effort effectively (Oni, 2000, p.213).

When most of these emigrant African assets arrive in Europe, North America and Asia either for studies or

employment, they excel. African students top classes in prestigious institutions, while professionals contribute significantly to the development of their host countries. Also, Africa's potential in copious material resources—mineral and agricultural—capable of positioning it at the development summit is undeniable. A primary factor behind the scramble for Africa in the late nineteenth century was its wealth in natural resources; its gold in Ghana, diamonds in South Africa, oil in Angola, Libya, Nigeria and Gambia, groundnut in Malawi, sugar in Senegal, coffee in Ethiopia, among others. Lee Wengraf (2018, p.151) underscored "the Colonial" scramble for Africa—"the fiercely competitive drive for Africa's natural resources and the partition of the continent between the "great" powers were essentially complete by the start of World War I." Sugar, especially one uncovered, attracts ants. Despite the unrestricted siphoning of these resources for almost a century, these natural resources seem inexhaustible. Notably, the post-independence era has witnessed a resurgence of this scramble—albeit in subtler forms—by multinational companies from the mid-to-late twentieth century to the present. The worth of Africa's material resources runs into trillions of pounds, enough to boost the human development index, drive

technological breakthroughs and elevate African countries to developed status:

Whereas the original scramble for Africa was driven by the search for raw materials such as rubber, gold, ivory, and palm oil, today metals and minerals are major targets for Western investment. Africa arguably holds some of the of greatest of the earth's wealth in terms of natural resources and leads global production in diamonds and gold, but it's also a key source of metals such as aluminum and platinum as well as coltan, a key ingredient for cell phones (Wengraf, 2018, p.154)

Abiodun Alao (2007, p.52) revealed, "Africa is generally considered the birthplace of mining activities. The oldest mining operation to be discovered (approximately 45,000 years old) was in Swaziland. Minerals such as copper, gold, and iron have been in use on the continent from time immemorial." That the cradle of global resource struggles to have the most basic of amenities, like functional processing industries, is a puzzle, but solvable. Significantly, Africa's agricultural resources present an opportunity to take more market share of

global food production; the quantity of cassava, cocoa, rice, coffee, grains, fibres, sugarcane, etc., are indicators. Bridging the gap between Africa's potential and democratic governance is imperative.

### Closing the Gap

From the foregoing, the distortions of democratic practice are prevalent and amazing potentials remain latent in Africa. Worrisome is this *status quo*, which positions Africa at the bottom rung. The second-largest continent globally seems bound to stay there, spectating with complacent satisfaction, as other continents achieve giant strides. To close this gap and turn the tide, democracy's essence—the people, African masses—for long deposed need to be reinstated to the top of the political scale of preference immediately. The misrepresentations of democracy in many of the fifty-four African countries are because the people's good are blurred either by personal/ethnic/religious interests of African leaders, foreign interests or both. Democratic institutions are overrun by these factors. Democracy can be represented right in African countries when the people's good are underpinned by two essentials: Vision and proaction in leadership.

First, vision concerns mental projections of where an African country can/should be in the nearest and distant future. Envisioning is the foundation of impactful, successful and great leadership. "The leader," John Maxwell (2007, p.171) argued, "finds the dream and then the people. The people find the leader and then the dream." Leaders finding the people before/without a solid vision or related conviction explain Africa's quagmire. Baiyee-Mbi Agbor-Baiyee observed that "there is a shortage of effective or visionary socioeconomic development initiatives, whether conceptualized, implemented, or driven by local leaders and governments" (2011, p.44).

It is then imperative that those desirous to lead in various tiers of government in Eastern, Western, Southern, Central, and Northern Africa have clear, unambiguous and beneficial visions that their stay in government would enable. Allowing consequent room for other governmental organs and democratic institutions to grow stronger is a key merit. The dismal trend of government involvement for the sake of office perks and sheer power hurts an African country's present and future. It is a gateway to corruption, nepotism, tribalism, religious fanaticism, insecurity, civil wars, brain-drain, poverty,

and amenability to any foreign entreaty. African electorates need to learn to decline monetary/household inducements and resist ethnic/religious sentiments to assess prospective leaders based on pedigree credibility and vision quality.

Second, proaction constitutes not merely actions but purposeful ones taken in agreement with a set vision. Some authoritarian leaders in Africa are prone to claiming conformity. They maintain that their political and economic styles are in Africans' best interest, adducing "China, a model of state capitalism in which the state steers production and the economy. Democracy is de-emphasized, at least in the short term, as economic rights supersede political rights" (Moyo, 2018, p.85). This school of thought contends that gains from democracy can be replicated without democracy. Besides portending autocracy's advancement, claiming to run a democratic government without upholding its tenets in principle or practice is deception, triggering the misrepresentation of democracy.

Now, more than ever, African countries need to start working actively for the development of the continent. Addiction to foreign aid makes them too dependent, vulnerable and pawns, not partners, to be exploited again as in the slave-trade and colonial epochs. Africans need to jump

this hurdle: "This contradiction, which labels foreign intervention as a form of neocolonialism, while at the same time blaming international intervention for inadequate funding, has dominated Africa's development literature to the extent that the role that Africans themselves ought to be playing in the process often receives little attention" (Kpinpuo, 2011, p.95). It is important for African countries to be wary of these aids and accept only non-mischievous ones to develop effectively. It behoves Africans to act as the main, not minor, characters in this quest to better their fortunes. Thus, using great visions to democratize politics and optimize economics is instrumental to Africa's sustainable development.

### **Conclusion**

This study has drawn attention to the implications of democratic travesties in Africa and has also kindled belief in overcoming them. This research has been guided by a keen sense of the past, present, and future. It explored how colonialism engendered a quest for national independence across Africa, and proceeded to examine the concept of democracy en route to underscoring misrepresentations of democracy today. Threads of egocentrism, tribalism, religious fad, and external interferences

run through them. Such short-sightedness robs African states benefits of foresight. Thus, retracing steps to practise democracy as established and sustained by the people is possible. This paper recommends a rigorous re-evaluation of disparate democratic governmental systems across Africa to ensure full adherence to democratic

principles. Inconsistencies need to be addressed forthwith. Going by the Latin maxim *nemo dat quod non habet*—you cannot give what you don't have, it is imperative for visionary leaders with big-picture, feasible ideas, and proactive resolve to replace those who fawn over developed nations for crumbs. Africa's impasse can be overcome.

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