

Philosophical Foundations of Democracy: A Challenge for Africa

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Abstract

Democracy is people's power of self-governance. Where there is self-governance, the people themselves have the power to determine the kind of politicians and political institutions they desire to adopt. The question is whether this or not is the case in Africa; and if not, why? This article hypothesizes that to get the right answers to this question and to address the many challenges facing Africa's political landscape, Africans need a better understanding of the concept of democracy and its origins. This article discusses the foundation of democracy in Greece, which is rooted in the principle of "self-rule", while in Western philosophy, it is the principle of "lawful political competition". Political competition is meant to bring about checks and balances, control unlimited political egoism, and create political stability. The foundations of democracy in traditional African societies were the principles of cooperation, individual merit, and consensus. Moral integrity and acting within moral principles were central to democratic practice. Since modern Africa has inherited its modern democratic principles and practice from the West, without taking into due considerations their pristine philosophical political principles, Africa faces several challenges in the areas of constitutionalism, ethics, merit of political parties, and political leadership.

Key Words: Democracy, Philosophy, Foundation, Africa, Challenge

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Introduction

One of the challenges in political theory and practice on the African continent is the right understanding of political democracy. This understanding is founded on different political philosophies influencing African political practice. On the one hand, there are African traditional governance principles in the mind of political practitioners, and on the other hand, there is the western understanding of democracy being imported to Africa. At the level of both theory and practice, most political leaders are confused as to whether democratic practice is to be regulated by moral principles or are to be completely separated from moral restrictions. Most importantly, there is great confusion as to whether democratic principles and practice should be based on the rule by the best man or rule by the best law. Linked to this, is the question whether political pluralism should be diversified on the basis of the best ideology of a political party or individual merit of a political leader.

All these, offer great challenges to Africa. This article thus looks at democracy as a concept, trying to understand its origin and basis both in Western philosophy and governance in Africa, in order to be able to understand the nature of democratic problems facing Africa and their possible solutions. In doing this, the article delves into the foundation of democracy in Greek philosophy, modern Western philosophy, and

in traditional African political philosophy. The hypothesis is that, to solve the many political challenges facing Africa today, Africans need a better understanding of democracy as a concept.

Democracy is here understood as the people's power to self-governance. This is in agreement with the views of Walter Kerber (1972:89), who maintains that the foundation of modern thinking about democracy is the philosophical idea of the sovereignty of the people. That is, all political power is traced back to the people themselves as the primordial subject of this authority. He lays emphasis on the fact that democracy requires that all citizens capable of using their reason and having a developed conscience, as free and basically equal humans, should themselves take part in arriving at decisions about the political landscape of their societies. Diamond *et al.* (1989), as quoted by Kabwegyere, maintains that democracy denotes a system of government that meets three essential conditions: a meaningful competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power; a highly inclusive level of political participation in selection of leaders and policies through regular and fair elections without excluding major social groups; and a high level of civil and political liberties – freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and

join organizations and to ensure the integrity of political competition (Kabwegyere 2000:1). Kabwegyere concurs with Arblaster (1987) who identified four ideas as the core of democracy. These are: popular power, popular government, popular participation, and political equality. In brief, democracy is the power of the people to govern themselves. It is important to trace this “people’s power” in the different philosophical traditions.

Greek Foundation of Democracy

In Greek thinking, democracy means government by the people, which originally meant the political form in which the people themselves possess and exercise all political authority. This is proposed in opposition to the rule of one man (monarchy) or a privileged group (aristocracy) and the corrupted forms of these (tyranny and oligarchy) (Plato 1968: Book IX). From this Greek background, Abraham Lincoln developed the most quoted definition of democracy as, a government of the people, by the people, for the people (Kabwegyere, 2000:3). This famous quotation actually means, a government that originates from the people, managed by the people themselves, and meant for the people’s well-being.

The foundation of democracy in Greece was based on the principle that people should rule themselves. But how that was to be done, did not have a unanimous answer. For

Plato, people could rule themselves by following the principle of justice (Plato, 1968: Book I & Book II). This meant respecting gifts of nature and accepting those gifts and limitations imposed on individuals and classes within society. Each class or individual could do as much as was permitted by nature for each to do their best. For that matter the best form of government, for Plato, is the aristocratic system of governance. This means, rulers should consist of a specially trained class of intellectuals whom he chose to call philosopher kings (Plato, 1968: Book IV). He termed his view aristocratic, because he believed that this class of specially trained intellectuals (philosophers) was best fitted to rule.

Etymologically “aristocracy” is derived from two Greek words “ariston” and “kratos” which when put together mean “the rule by the best” (Ochieng-Odhiambo 1994:3). So, true democracy is the rule by the best. He maintained that this would be true justice and true democracy, since nature endows each society with three classes of people: the rulers, the soldiers and the populace. Each of these classes corresponds to the natural capacities endowed in the individual soul: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive elements of the human soul respectively. The ruling class is the rational element of society (gifted with wisdom to rule); the soldiers are spirited with courage to guard society; and the populace consists of its appetitive element

(gifted with the virtue of work and obedience) (Plato 1968: Book V-VIII; Book 1-XII).

According to Aristotle, however, people can rule themselves by putting in place the best constitution by which they are guided to rule and be ruled. For Aristotle then, true democracy is constitutional rule, that is, rule by the best law. Aristotle maintained that in any state, the law must be the ultimate sovereign and not any person whatsoever. Aristotle considered constitutional rule as an intrinsic element for good government, and therefore as a characteristic of an ideal state. In politics and matters of governance, the question of laws is fundamental and cannot be pushed to the periphery.

A government that does not lose sight of the good (or bad) of its subject is also a government in accordance with law. Accordingly, Aristotle accepted the supremacy of law as central to a good state and not merely just an unfortunate necessity. For Aristotle, even the worst ruler cannot dispense with law because law has an impersonal quality which no man, however good, can attain. Constitutional rule, as Aristotle argued, has three main elements. First, it is rule in the public or general interest as distinguished and opposed to factional or tyrannous rule which is in the interest of a single class or individual. Second, it consists of concerted rule based on general regulations and not by arbitrary decrees. Third, constitutional

governance means government by willing subjects as opposed to despotism that is supported merely by force (Aristotle 1999).

At the foundation of the Greek concept of democracy is certainly the principle that people should rule themselves, whether through the “principle of justice” advocated by Plato, which he conceived as rule by the best man, or through Aristotle’s “principle of constitutionalism” which is rule by the best law to regulate political activities. Another important aspect of Greek democracy is the fact that political life must be regulated by “moral principle”. Plato called this moral principle the common good of all members of society, which was so important that it surpassed all individual goods. Because of this, Plato proposed a moral principle that, if any individual good conflicts with the common good, definitely, the individual good must be sacrificed for the sake of the common good. Consequently, he saw marriage or family ties and individual accumulation of wealth by political leaders and guardians as conflicting and rivalling factors in administration of society. He, thus, proposed that all rulers must not marry or have individual property.

The entire platonic educational system was intended to instil in the populace this moral principle, the highest good according to which both individuals and the whole society must act and be regulated. Aristotle, on the other hand, emphasized

that the main purpose or end of political society must be ethical. This, according to him, meant the real purpose of a state ought to include the moral improvement of its citizens, because it ought to be an association of humans living together to achieve the best possible life. Both Plato and Aristotle maintained the ethical or moralist theory of the state (Kabwegyere 2000:11-12).

The point being emphasized here is the fact that, for people to rule themselves, whether through the principle of justice (rule by the best man) or constitutionalism (rule by the best law), they must be guided by moral principles and directed towards the attainment of moral ends of society. So, democracy which is not guided by moral principles is not good, it is null and void. Secondly, governance which is not based on the people's participation and involvement would not be democratic.

Modern Foundation of Democracy

Modern foundation of democracy begins where the Greek thinkers ended. Modern thinking begins by reacting to what the Greek thinkers had emphasized about morality in political life and practice. They affirmed that the guidance of moral principles in political life is not necessary and in most cases makes democratic practice weak and impossible. The basic principle behind any democratic theory and practice must be "practical political success" (Machiavelli 1513),

other than dreamful political ideals that can never be realized. To make this practical, the entire political practice must be set free from moral restrictions for political success to be realized, so observed Machiavelli (1513:111).

Machiavelli articulated this in the following words:

[...] for if everything is considered carefully, it will be found that something which looks like virtue, if followed, would be his ruin; whilst something else, which looks like vice, yet followed brings him security and prosperity (1513:113).

So, it is in being amoral that a political leader can be successful, since being moral hinders him or her from political success.

Thus, Machiavelli, championed a break with Greek classical thinkers, and maintained that the true foundation of democracy is the philosophy of universal egoism that necessarily leads to competition. Humans have always and will ever remain corrupt and rooted in evil. In other words, humans are by nature egoistic, aggressive and acquisitive. The nature of human beings is irredeemably corrupt and rooted in evil. In this way it becomes necessary for those who run the state and prescribe laws to presume that all humans are guilty and that they are ready to use their badness whenever occasion provides itself. This universal egoism of humans is an immutable principle, which leads to competition, according to Machiavelli. So, apart from moral

corruption, the natural aggressiveness of human nature makes struggle and competition a normal feature of every society. Humans always commit the error of not knowing when to limit their hopes. Machiavelli argued that:

[...] how one lives is so far distant from how one ought to live, that he who neglects what is done for what ought to be done, sooner effects his ruin than his preservation; for a man who wishes to act entirely up to his professions of virtue soon meets with what destroys him among so much that is evil (Machiavelli, 1513:111).

Machiavelli continues to maintain that; “if he [the Prince] is wise he ought not to fear the reputation of being mean, for in time he will come to be more considered than if liberal. He concludes that for a prince, “[...] it is much safer to be feared than loved” (1513:119-120). This means, keeping to moral principles is not always beneficial for effective political control.

But on the other hand, this egoism explains the stability of healthy society in which opposing interests are held in equilibrium. So this corrupt, unlimited egoism is the basis on which opposing forces in society are put in equilibrium. Democracy is then the ability of political forces to create political equilibrium through competition within society. Political competition among men and political forces brings humans to check on the unlimited egoism of each other, thus creating democratic political stability.

This means, the principle that can regulate political activities in

human society is “lawful political competition”. Implying, this human egoism must be legalized by permitting competition and with regulations. So, democracy thus is the ability of political forces to create political equilibrium through competition within society.

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) on the other hand identified self-preservation to be the most fundamental natural principle upon which human society is built. Sabine, presenting Hobbes view, describes this natural law in the words:

A law of nature is a precept, or general rule found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that which is destructive to his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved (Sabine 1973:145).

But humans have two ways through which they can preserve themselves: either through primitive desire and aversions, from which arise all impulses and emotions, or through reason by which action can be diverted intelligently towards the end of self-preservation (Ochieng-Odhiambo 1994:27). According to Hobbes, instinct and reason are the two principles in human nature. Instinct hurries humans to take on or compete for what other humans want and so human beings conflict with each other. Reason, on the other hand, teaches humans how to preserve themselves intelligently without necessarily conflicting with other humans. What reason adds is not a new motive, but

a regulative power or foresight, by which the pursuit of personal security becomes more effective without ceasing to follow the general rule of self-preservation. Instinctive self-preservation is hasty acquisitiveness which begets antagonism, and rational self-preservation is more calculated selfishness which brings man into society.

This is done by making a social contract between the sovereign and the people; this will make the people to offer their obedience in exchange for protection. This social contract has two parts: a covenant of each member of the civil body with each other to acknowledge as sovereign a man or assembly of men a majority of their number agrees upon; secondly, the vote determining who or what is to be the sovereign. So, democracy is rational and calculated human selfishness through which humans preserve themselves by entering into a social contract.

This social contract brings humans into a civil society. This means, society which is a result of rational self-preservation must be regarded merely as a means to this end. The power of the state and authority of law are justified only because they contribute to the security of individual human beings, and there is no rational ground of obedience and respect for authority except the anticipation that these will yield greater individual advantage than their opposites. Humans do not have natural inclination towards society, as Aristotle contends, but towards

ones proper advantage according to Hobbes. Social contract is the solution that enables civil society to avoid wars and create peace and harmony in society.

In essence the foundation of democracy according to Hobbes is selfishness that negatively leads to competition, while positively leading humans to accept to form and live in society through a social contract. In fact, Hobbes believes that relationships within any existing political institution should be considered a social contract entered into, first among the people themselves, and between the people and their political leadership.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was outspoken on the philosophy of competition which is later applied in political theory. He said humans are like trees in a forest. Left alone they tend to put out branches at random and grow stunted, crooked and twisted. But subjected to lawful opposition, they tend to grow straight and upright. This type of competition indeed is good for humans and enables the lawless use of freedom to be checked (Lajul 1994:200). Kant reasoned:

It is just the same with trees in a forest: each needs the others, since each in seeking to take the air and sunlight from others must strive upward, and thereby each realizes a beautiful, straight stature, while those that live in isolated freedom put out branches at random and grow stunted, crooked, and twisted (Kant 1986:254).

For Kant, the foundation of democracy is in lawful competition that checks the lawless use of freedom by other members or organs of society.

For both Machiavelli and Hobbes the solution to universal egoism and selfishness of humankind is a strong political sovereign who must be allowed to regulate society without the constraining arm of morality. For Machiavelli, it does not matter how this sovereign whom he calls the prince comes to power, but what matters is how he manipulates the human egoism to create a united, strong and peaceful society. For Hobbes, however, this sovereign must have been chosen by a majority numbers of those with whom a social contract is made. His main duty is to protect and preserve the life of the community with whom he has the contract. For Kant however, lack of freedom or bondage is the main problem of human kind. Human bondage is created by both internal and external factors. Internal bondage is caused by fear and lack of courage to be free from these self imposed fears. External bondage is caused by human institutions including religion and the state.

At personal level, this bondage can be broken into two: negatively freeing ourselves from this bondage and positively and courageously committing ourselves to some positive values which are self-chosen as a binding principle. At the social level, lawful competition can help to

check the lawless use of freedom by others (Lajul 1994:216). Freedom is human capacity to be self-governing. But if everybody is self-governing, then society cannot be formed, unless check is put on the lawless use of freedom by others. Life in society is possible only when this personal capacity for self-governance is put in check through lawful competition. At the political level, competition can help us determine political excellence by competing political forces. It makes the different competing political systems to strive for superiority by putting across the best political value systems by which society can be ruled. This is the basis of democracy, according to Kant.

In general, however, during the modern period of philosophy, emphasis was put on the idea of competition as providing checks and balances in political democracy. Emphasis varied among the various thinkers within this period, besides competing for political excellence would enhance the good of society. Though I am aware that different forms of democracy have been proposed in the West, the form that has been exported to Africa, is basically, liberal democracy. Liberal democracy has been designed and organized on the principles of multiparty democracy, where different political parties compete to govern of society in freedom, other than individuals competing for political power. Secondly, moral indifference in the practice of democracy is commonly

adopted as a necessary condition for political success other than its subjugation to moral principles. Lastly, ideological differences was taken as a principle around which different political interest groups (parties) are formed and which were to compete for political power, but not individuals however meritorious their behaviour.

Though Walter Kerber (1972:89) acknowledges that "... the foundation of modern thinking about democracy is the philosophical idea of the sovereignty of the people; [...meaning] that all political power is traced back to the people themselves as the primordial subject of this authority", liberal democracy places emphasis elsewhere. For instant, Diamond (1996:1997), and Bratton and Walle (1997) say, liberal democracy offers the sovereignty of the law other than sovereignty of the people; government by consent of the people, other than government by the people; maximizes legal power and minimises popular power; focuses on the primacy of the individual other than primacy of the collective. Besides, liberal democracy emphasizes competition for political power through regular periodic elections; offers protection by means of law other than the realization of human potentials through participation. As Ake (2000:23) points out, the values of the market are the same core values of liberal democracy: egotism, property, formal freedom, and equality. As a result, social tensions and contradictions reflected in aggression, violence,

police brutality, murder, and arson are part of the social culture of liberal democracies.

African Foundation of Democracy

To talk about democracy in traditional African societies is a complete joke and an unbelievable myth to many political thinkers. In support of this, Sylvie argues that, this disbelief is grounded in two main misconceptions; the first being the dictatorial nature of many African rulers, and secondly, the misrepresentation that African societies are fundamentally undemocratic. Aboa-Bradwell has captured these views as follows:

Africans' internalization of the myth of the typically dictatorial nature of their rulers manifests itself in many ways. One of the most damaging is the tendency of many Africans to support dictators who, after falling out with their often Western backers, use fake African nationalism as a ploy to perpetuate themselves in power. Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and Laurent Gbagbo of Cote d'Ivoire are cases in point. [Secondly] The internationalization of the misrepresentation of African societies as fundamentally undemocratic and tyrannical is also evident in the tendency of many Africans to reject democracy as a Western invention that is alien to Africa (2013:3).

Aboa-Bradwell rightly observes that, while many Africans are often eager to criticize the slaughter of Africans and the looting of African wealth

by Western colonizers and neo-imperialists, many of these critics are unwilling to rebuke their own bad leaders under the pretext that they are, allegedly, ruling in an African fashion to defend African interests. Secondly, by saying, after all democracy is a Western invention, these critics re-enforce the above misconceptions.

Aboa-Bradwell continues to argue that, by modern standards, one would be right to say, Africa and many other pre-modern societies do not qualify as democratic societies. She writes:

By modern standards, neither ancient Athens, nor pre-modern Western monarchies, nor pre-colonial African kingdoms, nor the Aztec or Chinese empires, nor any other past empires, would be considered truly democratic societies. For instance, the enslavement and ritual killing of other human beings were practiced in most, if not all of these places. Where voting existed, several groups, often women and members of the lower classes, were not allowed to exercise this right (2013:4).

However, she continues to assert:

“[...] the presence of a few democratic elements, such as the capacity of eligible voters to attend debates and vote on specific issues, and the existence of democratic mechanics, are used to assert the democratic nature of ancient Athens. Equally, the presence of several democratic elements in pre-colonial African societies can and should be used to assert their democratic nature (Aboa-Bradwell, 2013:4).

Sklar defines democracy as a vital force in the demand for accountability by members of a community and the concession to it by rulers to their subjects (1983:11). He substantiates this in the following words:

But democracy dies hard. Its vital force is the accountability of rulers to their subjects. Democracy stirs and awakens from the deepest slumber whenever the principle of accountability is asserted by members of a community or conceded by those who rule. Democracy cannot be destroyed by a coup d'etat; it will survive every legal assault upon political liberty (Sklar, 1983:11).

This means, whenever, a community is stirred and awakens from its deepest submissive state to begin demanding for accountability from its leaders, then, democracy is at work. Even when the leaders may want to kill this consciousness in the minds of the people, such consciousness does not often die, because quite often it survives the legal or political assaults exerted on it.

In traditional African societies, the elements of this awakening and resistance to the assaults on the people's political liberties in the African indigenous communities, to demand from their leaders' accountability, existed.

A number of interesting examples from different kingdoms and empires in traditional African societies have been given. For instance, the Kingdom of Kongo, which existed from 1390 to 1914, at its height encompassing large parts of present-

day Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville). The Kongo king, named *Mwene Kongo* by the people, was believed by many to possess great power and authority. Aboa-Bradwell has in respect to the Kingdom of Kongo noted:

[...] the king's secular power depended on personal attributes, the will of the people and, above all, participatory democracy principles. [...] Each village [made up of 100 to 200 people] was ruled by a chief elected by the village's citizens. Villages were aggregated [...] and were governed by rulers elected by the villages' chiefs. [...] The provinces were ruled by leaders elected by states' governors. The provinces' rulers, in turn, elected the king of the Kongo Kingdom. Although they were, in principle, elected for life, the villages' chiefs, states and provinces' governors, as well as the king, were accountable to their electors, and could be ousted if they were deemed unfit to carry on ruling (Aboa-Bradwell 2013:5; see also: Hilton 1985; Jan Vansina 1965; and Davidson, 1969).

From this text, one can identify seven principles of democracy in the Kongo Kingdom: individual merit; people's will; people's participation; decentralized administration; people's *choice* – through elections; accountability; and people's *power* – ability by the people to remove a leader from power.

Another example Aboa-Bradwell gives is from the Songhai Empire, which existed from 1340 to 1591; it

extended across the Niger Valley, west to Senegal and east to present-day Niger, and covered nearly 1,500,000 square meters at its height (Cissoko 1996; and Hunwick 1999). Aboa-Bradwell writes:

The Songhai Empire was notable for the religious and administrative freedom enjoyed by its people, and for the democratic autonomy of its provinces. While the rulers and the elites were often followers of Islam, the overwhelming majority of the citizens were free to practice a wide variety of traditional African religions. Though the governors of the provinces were usually appointed by the Songhai ruler, they were free to administer these provinces according to the democratic will of their people. The citizens of villages and towns had the power to elect local representatives, who were directly accountable to them and not to the king on local issues. The judiciary system was independent and controlled, not by the king, but by members of the academic community who were answerable to their local constituencies (Aboa-Bradwell 2013:5).

In this text, again, one can see six different principles of democracy demonstrated, which were: autonomy, religious freedom; people's will (demonstrated through elections); decentralization (provincial administration); accountability (local provincial leaders were answerable to the people who elected them); and independence of the judiciary.

The third example is from Sylvie of the Mali Empire, which existed from the 1230s to the 1600s. It covered the modern-day countries of Senegal, southern Mauritania, Mali, northern Burkina Faso, western Niger, the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, the Ivory Coast and northern Ghana (Ki-Zerbo 1978; Chu and Skinner 1995; and Niane 1979). She writes:

The Mali Kings, called Mansa, acquired territories through conquests and annexations. However, they were able to keep their empire united not by relying on dictatorial rule, but by resorting to a highly decentralized form of administration. Thus, eligible voters in villages, towns and cities were allowed to elect their own chiefs. These chiefs had, in turn, the power to elect the governors of the provinces who were recognized as Dyamani-Tigui or masters of provinces by the Mansa. The county-level administrators, called Kafo-Tigui or county-masters were chosen, not by the Mansa, but by the governors of the provinces (Aboa-Bradwell, 2013: 6).

From this text again, one can identify principles of democracy: decentralized administration; and people's will (demonstrated through elections). When we talk about elements of modern democratic principles embedded in the traditional African political systems, we have concrete evidence. African traditional political systems were not then tyrannical and undemocratic by nature as some ill-informed political critics would want to believe.

Edward Wamala (2004) also believes that there was democracy in

traditional African political systems, and he gives Buganda as an example. Buganda Kingdom, on its part existed from around the 16th to the 19th century, covered most parts of present day central Uganda, extending to Kagwe bordering present day Tanzania in the South, Ankole in the west, Bunyoro in the north, and Busoga in the east.

Wamala identifies four democratic principles in the traditional Buganda Kingdom: subsidiarity, non-interference, legitimacy, and dependence. He writes: "Inherent in the idea of subsidiarity was the principle that higher units had legitimate authority, but only to promote the well-being of the lower units, aiding them to realize their good and their potential" (2004:436). The principle of subsidiarity demands that proper responsibility at the family level must not be taken away by the city authority, nor is the authority of the city, by the state.

Secondly, the principle of non-interference demands that interference from above in the affairs of smaller units is not welcome and even the king, in whom overall authority over the affairs of kingdom was entrusted, was nevertheless supposed to recognize domains where other leaders had authority. "Indeed, there is a well-known saying which hints at the principle that no one, including the [King] Ssabataka, is above the law" (Wamala 2004:436).

Thirdly, the principle of legitimacy requires that, a political power is recognized and accepted by the populace; otherwise its legitimacy

will be questionable. This principle helps to discipline political leaders since, "... a chief, who withdrew his recognition from the [Kabaka] Ssabataka [...], needed the support of his own clansmen. To mobilize and maintain support, an individual [clan head] Mutaka needed to behave in a manner that endeared him to his clansmen" (Wamala 2004: 436).

Lastly, the principle of dependence means that even the Kabaka, to keep his political authority depended on the support he got from the different clans and their clan heads. So to subdue the rebellious clans, the king had to seek the support and consensus of other clan leaders; otherwise he would not be able to control his enemies and supporters. So, even the [king] Kabaka "... needed to behave justly, fairly, and with a sense of propriety, or risk alienating many [clan leaders] Bataka, thereby facilitating military coalition against his rule" (Wamala 2004: 436). A Ganda proverb such as: "Authority is like ankle bells; they do not ring in water" (Wamala 2004:437), seems to confirm this principle.

All these examples, emphasize that there were elements of democracy in African traditional societies, since the bottom line of any democracy is the will of the people. In more emphatic terms, as Sklar puts it above, democracy is the vital force in the demand for accountability by the members of a community and the concession to it by rulers to their subjects. These examples show that political leaders in traditional Africa

were aware of their responsibilities to the citizens, the limitation of their powers, and how to strike a delicate balance between their authority and the people's power in order to keep at all times, political stabilities, lest political instability would ensue.

The central difference between Western democracy and traditional African democracy is in the fact that, in the West, democratic opinions are based on political ideology, while in traditional Africa, they are based on individual merit of political candidates. Choice in Western democracy is based on the merit of a political ideology, while in Africa it is based on the merit of the individuals and their personality (Lajul 2014:101). Every democracy should show some level of dependence of political authority on the power of the people who mandated them. One would not talk of democracy, without this relationship between people's power and the authority leading the people.

Lajul (2014:95-96) adds that, even though people played their roles to check the balance of power of their leaders, in Africa ultimate appeal was often made to the spiritual powers to check the political powers of the leaders. Such appeals were always made to the gods of their ancestors. They believed, the gods would be annoyed or displeased by reckless or unprincipled behaviour of their political leaders.

Ultimately, democracy in African traditional political societies was founded on a strong sense of

cooperation by building political consensus around the individual merit principle to entrust political leadership.

Challenge for Modern Africa

Given that Africa is permeated by these two political theories founded on different paradigms, can bring several challenges to African democratic practice. Besides, how can Africa harmoniously manage her political democratic powers, compounded by her often fragile nation states? Certainly, Africa has several political challenges, but the interest of this article is to trace those challenges and relate them to democratic practice. For instance, the fragile nature of African nation states, attracts another host of issues to be looked into deeply to understand the different political challenges, unfortunately it is not the focus of this article. Though we are aware that the manner in which African states have been instituted calls us to reflect on what Basil Davidson (1992) has rightly called: *The Black Man's Burden: Africa and the Curse of the Nation-State*, we shall have to limit ourselves and focus on the burdens of Africa, from the point of view of democracy.

If democracy is the power of the people for self-governance, then the first issue is to define how different people should govern themselves in the world today. Unfortunately, the world today wants to understand democracy in the context of the

current Western thinking and to use it as the yard stick for monitoring political phenomena in the world. An international body such as the United Nations keeps monitoring political events in the world on the basis of the Western model. They send their representatives to monitor democratic processes and their implications on people in different countries around the world. The only problem with this method of monitoring is to use one subjective lens to understand and judge political events all over the world that creates major political challenges; some of which are:

First is how to harmonize the rule of law with the culture of law (constitutionalism). Contemporary African states have constitutions as a basis of their rule of law, but what has yet to sink deep into the heart and minds of Africans is the culture of law. In traditional Africa, their unwritten constitutions were deeply rooted in the minds and hearts of the African peoples. Such unwritten laws formed the basis of the culture of law to the extent that it was difficult to separate those laws from the people's general way of life. This created stability in the very practice of the rule of law. So, constitutionalism, which is the harmony between the rule of law and the culture of law, is lacking in Africa today. That is why African constitutions are often changed at will without any major protest to this practice. For the African people to resist unnecessary constitutional amendments, those constitutions

must become part and parcel of the African cultural value systems, which current African constitutions have not yet acquired.

Many Africa leaders seem to be following Machiavellian thinking, which leads us to the second challenge Africa has to contend with, that is how to subject political practice to moral principles. Modern Western political philosophy, borrowing from Machiavelli, emphasizes that effective political practice should be independent of morality. This may not be formally accepted by any practicing political leadership anywhere in the world, however the actual political practice in Africa today shows that many African political leaders follow the Machiavellian principles. In political practice for instance, many African political leaders appear to believe that; "... it is better to be feared, than to be loved" (Machiavelli, 1513:119-120). This disheartening practice has turned many African leaders into dictators, leading their own people to fear them, since many are heartlessly brutal and cruel men.

Machiavelli also argued that political leaders, must appear to be virtuous, but should know that practicing virtue may bring them to ruin. In fact, this principle holds that if political practice is subjected to moral principles, the practitioner would become weak and irrelevant to meaningful political purposes. On the other hand, it is good to acknowledge that some African political leaders have made an effort

to subject their political practice to moral principles. However, with such a divergence of perception of whether moral principles are relevant to political practice or not, Africa is now challenged as to whether moral political practice or the amoral one should be followed.

Another challenge lies in the fact that African leaders have been seen trying to please the West or conform to the demands of the Western concept of competitive democracy, without properly internalizing its dynamics and relevance to African's unique situations. Most Western governments and Western donor organizations, expect African leaders to embrace multiparty democracy, rule of law, good governance, human rights, among others, without properly understanding them. Such demands impose on African leaders unrealistic standards, while the African leaders on their part, make no efforts to identify, determine and apply democratic principles that originate from African value systems and indigenous practices.

Fourthly, while in the West democracy is based on political ideologies that compete for political dominance, traditional Africa democracy was based on personal integrity of political leaders. Whichever political group that may be formed in Africa, it is bound to suffer from lack of focus of its members as to whether they are to vote for ideology of a party or for the leaders who champion the ideology?

While this article may not provide a conclusive answer to this question, in my view, most African electorates are confused about what they admire in their various parties of affiliation. Some definitely look at the integrity of their leaders, which in my opinion is the majority, while a few others look to the soundness of party ideology.

In Africa, political competition is still characterized by a lot of lawlessness. There seems to be the rule of the jungle: that is, survival for the fittest in competing for political positions. Without lawful competition, political justice and democracy cannot prevail in Africa. Some of these competitions are over the ability to take charge of the allocations of the national resources. Political parties in Africa often, are affiliated to some tribal or religious interest groups, which in the end become resource allocation centres, to which one must become affiliated in order to benefit.

While Kant identified internal and external sources of human bondage, in Africa today, most of our bondage in terms of political freedoms is external. This does not mean, Africa is free of internal bondage, which Kant identified as fear and lack of courage. Fear and lack of courage in Africa is caused more by overwhelming ignorance and widespread poverty. While external bondage, is caused more by our governments (elected or self-imposed) together with the West and attendant donor agencies that often support oppressive African

regimes. In most of Africa, respecting the dignity and freedom of citizens and organized groups is still a big challenge.

Through general elections today, the people are supposed to express their political wishes, but few of these political wishes are truly of theirs, and in the rare situation where such are the true reflection of the people's desires, they are not respected by leaders. Many African leaders do not take into consideration the people's wishes in making major political decisions. By decree and manipulation of the law, African political leaders change political systems or make political decisions that gravely affect the social harmony of African societies. This challenge is created by the fact that liberal democracy is not about popular power, but legal power; it is not about the sovereignty of the people, but sovereignty of the law; it is not governance by the people, but governance by consent of the people – loosely determined through the ballot box and not by the people; it is a democracy that maximises the power of law and minimises the power of the people; a government where primacy of individuals is held far above the priority of the populace.

The most serious challenge is that replacing the sovereignty of the people by the sovereignty of the law, requires that these laws be a reflection of the people's will. Unfortunately, in most instances, the very laws by which the African people are governed, are not consonant with their will, their

interests or their consent. As already mentioned, these laws are not in line with the value system of the people and are not engraved in their hearts and minds, making them their laws and a true reflection of their will and culture.

African leaders have too much power, their power is actually limitless. This ranges from the way they use national resources to the way they manipulate political decisions. Individuals or sections of the population sometimes languish in abject poverty while others enjoy lavish lives. Individuals and communities have to ally themselves to the centres of such powers if they are to get a share of the national cake, so to speak.

Most political leaders seem not understand the meaning of political representation, since instead of representing a constituency or their ideology, they are seen to represent their personal interests completely detached from the interests of the people or institutions that delegated them.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the philosophical foundation of democracy, whether in Africa or in the West, is basically the idea that power belongs to the people; that is that, power is derived from the people and it is delegated by the people.

However, the mode in which this people's power is delegated varied in different historical and philosophical traditions in the world. It is this mode through which this people power is dispensed that qualifies a particular society as democratic or not.

For the Greek city-states it was the duty of the citizens, who on the whole were a small percentage of the population, which democratically chose their political systems and delegated their power to their leaders through voting. Electoral democracy, was thus, the practice in Greek politics.

In modern Western systems on the other hand, this power is competed for by different political parties that sell their political ideologies to the people who eventually, through a majority vote, decide to which political ideology this power would be delegated. This is the basis of multiparty democracy.

In African traditional society, this power was enshrined and consolidated in a person or persons from recognized families or clans (royal families), by general consensus. To build this general consensus, meetings were held by elders who dialogued and eventually arrived at a consensus. From this generally agreed position, political power was delegated to the person or persons selected.

The central difference between African and Western democratic systems is that, while in the West different ideologies are identified

and allowed to compete for power, while in Africa the main ideology is one – the cultural and traditional worldview and value system of a particular society. One is believed to have the good of the entire society at heart and who is likely to foster and preserve it was always preferred to those who might become liabilities to cultural values and their preservation. Thus African traditional democracy was founded on the philosophy of cooperation, individual merits and consensus.

Lastly, while the people and laws guided and checked balance of power in the Western, in Africa, supernatural powers played a major moderating role in addition political and legal factors. This means, appeal was ultimately made to the African ancestors and the gods to check possible abuse of power by human leaders.

Recommendations

The following are some recommendations we can derive from our discussions. From the Greek and African traditional democratic systems, contemporary African politicians could learn the idea of participatory democracy. By this we mean, a possibility of choosing whatever political system Africans prefer, provided the people wants to be ruled according to it. Elections or voting on important issues can no longer be avoided if African democracy is to be built, strengthened and sustained. African governments have to work to enable societies to

build sustainable electoral cultures. This has been demonstrated very clearly in Tanzania and a few other African countries where electoral democracy has been seen to have taken root.

Constitutional democracy is now a must, since without meaningful constitutions people will no longer submit to one man rule. Present day African states are no longer those natural societies where people related by blood ties and power had evolved through time into formation of chiefdoms or kingdoms as they used to be, in a bygone era. New principles have to be put in place to establish and maintain modern African multi cultural national identities. This can be done by establishing clear and distinctive political objectives which must include the provision of a full and happy life for all the distinctive groups within different the different countries.

To attain these objectives, the state must have a suitable constitution and an adequate economic arrangement. Such a constitution must conform to certain universally valid principles. Some of which are: respect for the universal declaration of human rights, such as, freedom of association and assembly. To do this, Africans must develop a culture of law and constitutionalism, respected by all and deeply rooted in the hearts and minds of the citizens.

Personal integrity of political leaders is a must for Africa, and this cannot be easily substituted by the integrity of political ideology. Most

political parties in Africa are not built on different political ideologies; but rather, differences in Africa occur at the level of choice of leaders. Different leaders tend to adopt different political agenda which in essence are not reflective of different ideologies, so consensus democracy and the principle of individual merit could be a preferable methodology in political practice.

Centralized power based on the status of the family's or clan's recognized royal status must be studied carefully before they are made part of Africa's modern constitutions. This is because political interests and ideals of present day African societies are no longer homogenous as they used to be. Different political interests and ideas have fractured Africa and no one can claim to unite them into a single-minded political idea as it was in traditional African societies. Equally, royal democracy must be properly studied to see how it can be adapted to multiparty democracy, and such parties should try to develop ideologies that can compete for power.

From Western philosophy, Africa can borrow the principle of competitive democracy. African politicians should acknowledge that political competition is not bad. Destructive competitions, which compels politicians to destroy one another is bad, but where competition compels people to strive for excellence and accountability, is good. The principle of lawful

competition enables society to strive for excellence, accountability, transparency and responsibility to the electorate. But lawful competition cannot take place without freedom of choice (from possible alternatives) enabling the citizens to express their political opinions in a lawful way, other than through chaos or rebellion which destabilize society (Mugaju & Oloka-Onyango 2000:25-27).

African traditional democracy can teach African politicians the philosophy of cooperation. Through cooperation, Africa will learn the concept of democracy of consensus. We can choose our leaders and change our system not always through confrontational politics, but also by building mutual confidence in each other so that consensus may be reached on important political questions without necessarily becoming confrontational.

Political ideologies can be a basis for competition in political parties in Africa, but with a view that the leaders of such parties are more important than the they espouse. Such leaders must develop personal moral integrity and above all the integrity to subject political practice to moral principles.