

## Interrogating the transnational context of democratic movements in Africa

Von *Kehinde Olayode*

Africa's democratic movements have been located within two different historical contexts of global waves of democracy and African struggles for political liberation. Advocates of the first approach tend to see Africa's democratic movement as part of what Samuel Huntington (1991) calls the third wave of democracy, which in his view began in the 1970s in Southern and Eastern Europe. While each wave is propelled by a different constellation of factors, the overall process was driven by the victorious democratic hegemonic powers. Others have argued that, while Africa's democratization was influenced by developments elsewhere in the world, it was primarily rooted in the continent's long history of struggle against slavery, colonialism, and postcolonial misrule (Ake 1996; Scott 1985; Olayode 2011).

The Arab Spring, which swept away autocratic regimes in Northern Africa and Middle East, brought social movements' role in processes of democratization once again to the fore. After decades of heavy-handed rule, citizens took to the streets and forced autocrats out of office. While the urge for freedom was vibrant in the whole region, there are notable differences between the countries involved.

The dynamics of the Arab Spring raise questions that somewhat resemble the discussion after the fall of the Iron Curtain and the subsequent democratic movements in Central and Eastern Europe: Why did these events occur like in the 1990s after decades of authoritarian rule? What role do transnational interventions play in democratization struggles? How does one explain the origins of the new pressures for democratization in Africa, especially in the wake of global financial crisis? Can external factors be credited for stirring up the democratic wave that swept through Africa in the 1990s and the contemporary movements? Under what condition can a fully African democratic project be initiated and sustained in the context of accelerated globalization and the crisis of the neo-liberal world order?

The central argument here is that the international order of the post cold world has given a new momentum for democratization movement in Africa, assisting and complementing the internal forces already struggling for democratic change. However, in almost all countries that experienced democratic change, internal forces were already struggling for democracy and human rights. The local pro-democracy movements seized the opportunity provided by the new global disposition towards democratization.

### 1. Interrogating the transnational context of democratization

Transnational democratization can be located within the context of several contemporary developments: an intensification of globalization, the third wave of global democratization and the rise of transnational social movements. Democratization is not just a by-product of economic development but a process embedded in an international normative order. Transnational activist networks diffuse democratic principles, support domestic allies, and put pressure on authoritarian regimes. With the creation of the United Nations (UN) in 1945, the international community established universally valid norms of domestic conduct broadly defining ideas of democratic governance (Schmitz 2004: 404). The greater the difference between domestic conduct and international norm, the more likely it is that domestic or transnational groups will mount efforts to expose such contradictions (Schmitz 2004: 403-404).

Jean Grugel's (1999) studies of the context of democratization account for the impact of the transnationalisation of international relations on democratization processes. She argues that processes of democratization in Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Central and Eastern Europe were initiated as a result of international pressures or activities outside the states in question. The argument was that the collapse of communism and the dismantling of the Soviet Empire heralded *the universal victory* of Western liberal democracy, which meant that Africa like other regions had no alternative to adopting the Western model through democratization. Thus, the *victory* of market capitalism meant that Western economic and political models became the international *standard* for regimes wishing to integrate into the global order.

Samuel Huntington (1991: 34-76) identified five factors in the *third wave of democratization*, all of which have an international dimension: the unprecedented economic growth of the 1960s; legitimacy problems linked to declining performance during the 1970s; doctrinal and policy transformation on the part of the Vatican and a new social and political role for national churches; changes in the policies of international actors, including Carter's human rights policies; the new interest of EU in human rights, linked in part to Gorbachev's policy changes in the late 1980s; and, finally, snow-balling or diffusion effects (Akinrinade 1998: 74-75).

Globalization also implies political reforms evident in the number of countries that have undergone political liberalization, concomitant with economic reforms imposed by international institutions. The prevailing argument presents a positive correlation between democracy and globalization based on the assumption that economic liberalization cannot be sustained without liberalizing the political structures of the state. It assumes that an underlining capitalist logic underlines the global democracy movement, which placed the interest of global capital at the centre of democracy, and above people's interests in development. This account denies the efforts of Africa indigenous democratic movements and marginalizes the African's contribution to mainstream global democracy movements.

Part of globalization is the revolution in information and communication technologies (ICT). It would be interesting to examine how the ICT revolution as manifested in the cell-phone, internet and cable television, among others, has or has not provided a stimulus for the third wave of democratization and aided the socializing aspects of democratization. ICT has encouraged mass mobilization, especially, with the use of new social media, which proved effective in Arab Spring, Nigeria's anti-subsidy removal demonstrations and other contemporary social movements across Africa. The flip side of ICT is the gradual erosion of African cultural values and the imposition of foreign cultural values manifested in dressing, music, language, entertainment, among others.

## 2. What type of democracy?

In contrast to earlier efforts to explore democracy from multiple perspectives and vantage points, democracy is now seen to be nothing more than shorthand for electoral politics which has become the unchallenged yardstick for measuring *good governance*. Electoral democracy is a key component of the political conditionality that is applied to many African countries in their bargaining with the international financial institutions. Playing into the hands of many African leaders, this has, in turn, led to a limiting of democracy to periodic elections (whose rules are frequently rigged and whose organization is often seriously flawed). Contemporary democratic movements in Africa have been influenced by the global occupy movement and are resisting the contradictions of neo-liberalism which is, among other things, evident in food riots, fuel subsidy protests in Nigeria and the rise of ethno-nationalism.

It is therefore necessary to go beyond the prevalent but narrow - and narrowing - notions of democracy and governance that have taken hold and, in so doing, capture the true essence of democracy in order to enhance our understanding of the processes and challenges faced by many African countries in building truly representative governments. In whatever way the term is understood, democracy must be located in its local, national, and global contexts. It is also imperative to relate democracy to issues of culture, history, ideology, economic development, interest groups, social movements, gender, class, caste, ethnicity among others.

### 3. Contesting arguments on democratization in Africa

Discourse on Africa's democratic movements and the prospects for democratic consolidation has focused on issues relating to the relative roles of domestic and external actors; historical and contemporary dynamics of democratization; structural and contingent factors; and economic and political dimensions of liberalisation. An argument that highlights the primacy of internal factors as fuelling democratic movements underscores the strength of domestic political protests and pro-democracy movements which are stirred and energized by the failures of development projects, the economic crises of the 1980s and 1990s, and the disintegration of the postcolonial state's legitimacy and capacity. Regional transitions offer important examples here, such as in the case of Benin in francophone West Africa, Zambia in Southern Africa, the Palestinian Intifada for the Arab Spring in North Africa, and the dismantling of the Apartheid regime in South Africa for continental inspiration. Those who emphasize external forces point to the decisive impact of the end of the Cold War, the demonstration effects of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, and the imposition of structural adjustment programs and political conditionalities by Western bilateral and multilateral financial institutions (Barkan 2009).

There is also considerable debate as to whether Africa's democratization is attributable to economic or political factors. The first approach examines the role played by post-colonial development failures and, particularly, the economic crises during the *lost decade* of the 1980s, which were exacerbated by structural adjustment programmes imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and generated widespread opposition from various social groups, especially the pauperized middle and working classes, who spearheaded the democratic reform movements. The second approach concentrates on the political crisis of the postcolonial state, highlighting its inability to forge nationhood and manage the centrifugal forces of postcolonial society such as ethnicity (Ake 2000).

### 4. African's democratic movements from ahistorical perspective

The uprisings and protests in 2011 in Tunisia, Egypt, Uganda, Malawi, Swaziland, Senegal and Botswana are part of a protracted history of resistance by ordinary Africans against oppressive regimes and unpopular policies, dating back to the anti-colonial struggles of the 1940s and 1950s. This follows from a long history of people's struggle for freedom from the days of resistance against colonial subjugation, post-second world war nationalist struggles, and postcolonial struggles against authoritarian single party/military rule, culminating in the post-cold war *third wave* of democracy that swept away many of Africa's despotic governments in the 1990s. Thus, the struggle for democracy, accountability, social justice and human rights in Africa, clearly predates the monumental upheavals in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. As Nzongola-Ntalaga (1995) has rightly noted, the democracy movement in Africa is a social protest against the failure of the neo-colonial state to live up to the people's expectations of independence, including the fulfilment of their basic human needs. Rather than locating the source of the current pressures

for democratization to outside influences, it could be argued that the loss of legitimacy by African states has been responsible for democratization struggles.

## 5. Challenges to consolidating democracies in Africa

The global environment within which the advancement of democracy takes place has become more complex. The people's desire for democratic governance needs to be reinforced by a re-invigorated multilateral system, which is essential for the strengthening of the international rule of law, and by developing multifaceted responses to religious and other forms of extremism which pose threats to the advancement of democracy. Democratization is often taking place in authoritarian environments that resist change, or in countries with weak institutions that provide insufficient security to their citizens, in countries with incomplete processes of nation-building and in countries with poorly developed or skewed economies.

For many emerging democracies in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and elsewhere, the biggest challenge is to institutionalize these novel multiparty democracy systems and make democracy deliver its promise in terms of reducing poverty and improving the quality of life. These processes are slow and tedious, but today there is greater acceptance that security and economic development need to go hand in hand with improving democratic governance.

## 6. Conclusion

Africans crucial contribution to strengthening democratic movements and consolidating their gains should be acknowledged. As has been argued throughout this paper, external support in the right place can help to ease the pain of transition to democracy, but Africans themselves play an important role in sustaining and consolidating it. Strategic engagement of global forces should be decided on the basis of how the policy supports national interests in terms of promoting economic growth, redistribution and structural change. If democratization is to be firmly anchored in African societies, the initiative towards democratization should remain in the hands of domestic social forces. Fundamental to this endeavor is the need to build a functioning and effective state that responds to the concerns of its citizens and articulates a common national development vision unconstrained by the remote forces of neoliberal globalization (Fantu 2012: 265-267).

In conclusion, how should we evaluate arguments about the internal and external contexts of democratic movements in Africa? It is clear that the democratization struggle in Africa is not just a response to changes in Eastern Europe or one that is imposed by donors or international pressures. In almost all the countries that have witnessed a sort of democratic change, there were internal forces, already struggling for democracy and human rights. However, it is also true that the international order that resulted from the global democratic movement has given a new momentum to democratization processes, assisting and complementing domestic forces that were already struggling for democratic change in Africa.

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