

Democracy is the Key to Africa's Social Transformation

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I have read Professor Toyin Falola's historically grounded and brilliant piece on "The West and the Hypocrisy of Democracy" (Falola, 2024). I do agree with his thesis that overall, the West has superimposed its avarice for control and exploitation of African natural resources over its avowed interest in seeing democracy thrive in Africa. In short, Professor Falola thoroughly and credibly established his thesis of the West's hypocritical approach to democratic enactments on the African continent.

In its bid to safeguard what it defines as its strategic interests—a code term for Africa's natural resources—the West has generally had a pattern of propping up counter-revolutionary strivings and their leaders, while at the same time helping to crush pro-people, genuinely African-centered movements and leaders. That is to say that in its dealings with African governments and peoples, the West has had a tendency to place a premium upon its own perceived interests instead of the social developmental interests of pertinent African peoples and their governments. We saw the same pattern of Western alignment with reactionary forces, as opposed to people-oriented, African-centered forces, during the independence movements on the continent, be they armed nationalist movements that occurred in the settler-colonies or the generally non-violent independence movements that swept through the non-settler colonies. As Professor Falola aptly pointed out, the erstwhile Cold War between the West and the East tended to serve as the fulcrum for and prism by which either side largely determined which side to support in a typical African conflict or electoral process. Somehow, the West often tended to take the wrong side of history, to align with African political currents that were not necessarily in alignment with the aspirations of the people for meaningful social transformation.

Though it propagates the popular governmental system of democracy, the West (which Professor Falola defines particularly, but not exclusively as the United States, Britain and France) has, when and where it pleases it, sacrificed that goal of democratic governance on the altar of economic exploitation expediency; and African people, overall, with of course exceptions, here and there, have suffered, rather than benefited, from trying to adhere to the adulterated nature of the Western democratic clarion call. In 2023, an anti-establishment military coup in Niger triggered a new round of debate about neo-colonialism in Africa, particularly the peculiarly avaricious brand of French neo-colonial stranglehold on a set of countries which, on the surface, are viewed by the world as its former colonies in West Africa and Central Africa but which, in reality (as it turns out), are still its economic colonial outposts. This new round of debate drew global attention to "The 11 Components of the French Colonial Tax in Africa" (Dr. Y., 2017). One of the fallouts from the Niger coup d'état and its consequent reinvigoration of African global intellectual attention to the neo-colonial discourse is that some of us began to re-think a long held notion that Africa's contemporary developmental difficulties stem largely from failures of political leadership (and

they are legion but arguably no more deleterious as political leadership failures or lapses in other parts of the world) coupled with bureaucratic corruption, for it turns out that beneath this much propagated façade of failed African political leadership as the ultimate explanation for Africa's socioeconomic deficits lies an almost quiet but ongoing bloodsucking neo-colonial taxation system that drains life out of the financial bloodstream of the African political economy, given that, for instance, former African French colonies are reported to be still paying over \$500 billion as colonial tax to France each year (Enyanh, 2019).

Given available evidence, it is fair to infer that the West, generally speaking, has not allowed Africa to chart its own destiny and freely pursue a path towards true, inner-driven social transformation. For instance, economic structural adjustment promulgations have been applied by the West, through the international financial institutions that it controls, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), to compel African governments to pursue a path of denationalization, deindustrialization, and deflation that is antithetical to human social development. Among other indices, the annual statistical data of the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) attests to that fact (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP], n.d.). In his write-up, Professor Falola also provided rich historical examples of all these contestations. A message that emerges from Falola's essay is that the West generally does not want to see a self-reliant, African democratic synergy. Instead, the West wants a dependent, manipulatable, and exploitation-prone continent, not a germination of self-determination for self-development. Thus, in African political history, we have seen instances of military coups that were mounted against truly African-centered, people-oriented leaders who were perceived by the West not to be in bed with the Western paradigm for how Africa ought to lead its political economic life, and even how Africa should manage its social lifestyles. Thus, for the West, determination of a good (or a moderate, as they say) African leader is based on a spurious judgement about who is pro-Western or who is anti-Western, not necessarily who is pro-African. One wonders how this Western calculus would designate an African national leader or aspirant leader who seeks to establish African control over African resources. Famous examples of people-oriented, African-centered leaders who were dislodged through reactionary military coups include Prime Minister Patrice Émery Lumumba of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, and Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso. For additional information on Western complicitous roles in those and similar coup d'états in Africa, among others, see a recent report in *Declassified UK* (Mohamed, 2024). When a Nigerian military Head of State, Murtala Muhammed, who was transforming the Nigerian sociopolitical landscape during his short spell in office, was assassinated by an unsuccessful military counter-coup of 1976, the fact that the coup failed despite Muhammed's killing, the fact that his deputy was able to take over and continue the military administration's national agenda, and the fact that the coup leaders were subsequently tried and executed, effectively eclipsed any impulse for probing whether the counter-coup itself had been externally-instigated.

Questions to ponder

A tangent question is whether what is usually touted as "Western Strategic Interests" does, in the end, percolate down and benefit the broad masses of the West or whether it ultimately mainly serves the profit goals/motives of the mega global corporations that are headquartered in Western capitals. Related to that is another tangent point that seems not to attract prime attention in all this

discourse about neo-colonialism, namely that within the West itself lies pockets of minority populations which continue to face challenges in the areas of human and civil rights.

Where I tend to defer

That said, I would like to state that I believe that democracy—that is, representative governance—is an imperative form of governance for Africa and, in fact, for all human communities on Earth. I am of the position that it is human for a people to want to have a say in how they are governed. In that respect, the ballot box, as we know it, is merely one of possible ways by which a people can actualize what I see as an innate quest to participate in decision-making about their lives and life prospects, or have that participation delegated, as we see in a representative form of governance. In other words, democracy, which I define as fundamentally a form of governance that reflects the will of the people, is not necessarily an invention of any particular segment of the global human community. I compare this to “thought,” or the act of thinking, which is conscious of itself, as another phenomenon which is innate in the *Homo sapiens* species and thus not the invention of any segment of the global community of human beings, though we know that a particular branch of the human family would like to fancy itself as its inventor.

Second, we need to be clear that where democracy has failed in Africa, it is not necessarily because democracy in and of itself is not a workable form of governance for Africa. Professor Falola himself cited several examples of calculated Western efforts to squelch genuine democratic fertilization on the continent through its support for counter-revolutionary, reactionary forces who did/do not necessarily represent the real choices of the people but whom the West perceives as being amenable to their economic exploitation designs—euphemistically called “strategic interests.” I believe that democracy is the key to Africa’s social transformation. Again, by democracy, I mean a system of governance established by the people, based on the people’s socioeconomic interests, and driven by the will of the people, as expressed through the ballot box, as an example. Where a government of the day is based upon the true will of the people and also removable through the same will of the people, that government inevitably must be accountable and has a reason to perform, knowing that if it fails to perform, the electorate will get rid of it. A key problem with Africa’s experimentations with democratic rule—with reasonable exceptions such as Botswana, South Africa, Zambia, Angola, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal, Namibia, and Algeria—is that a firm administrative and technological root and a firm political culture have not yet been manifestly established for capturing the true will of the people. We have seen subversions of voting procedures, voting instruments, and voter intimidation in given African polities, such as the notorious example of Nigeria’s 2023 presidential and governorship elections. But elsewhere, we have also seen exemplary national electoral successes, such as the victory of opposition candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye in Senegal’s presidential election of March 2024—an election that has been characterized as “well-organized, peaceful, transparent, and inclusive” (Miller, 2024).

Third, I do not wholly agree that incumbent longevity, as we have seen in progressive societies like Rwanda and Uganda, does necessarily negate democracy or constitute examples of the opposite of democracy. In fact, longevity of rulership is a mark of African traditional systems of governance. My position is that a borrowed practice of changing national governments or conducting fresh national elections every four years is not conducive to the teething developmental

needs of a developing country. Some of us who champion this four-year electoral cycle as an approach to democratic governance and then quickly cast aspersions on long-serving African leaders (whether or not they are leading effectively) appear to forget that their thinking appears to be informed by the Western experience (which itself is not necessarily homogenous) and not necessarily informed by considerations about the stupendous costs of running national elections every four years and how affordable that might or might not be for a developing country that is saddled with expensive infrastructural development priorities. As I just indicated, the Western experience with the tenure of elective offices is not necessarily homogenous, and I cite the case of the United States to buttress my point. How many of us are aware that the US practice of limiting its presidency to two terms of a total of eight years dates back to 1951, when the 22nd Amendment to the US Constitution took effect? And that term limitation of the 22nd Amendment was not necessarily the result of a grassroots thirst for a term limitation but the outcome of an intra-political class push mainly from the Republican Party, which saw the constitutional presidential term limitation as a means of getting itself back to the presidential office after a long spell of a Democratic Party occupation of the White House due to successful re-elections of the incumbent; specifically, the constitutional amendment was the result of a Republican-led rebellion against the fact that incumbent Franklin D. Roosevelt (Democrat) had been re-elected as president for an unprecedented four terms. Notable is that in terms of the US evolution as an integrated national entity, at the time that the 22nd Amendment took effect (1951), the US was no longer at the primary stage of national social development or national integration, still needing to set in place elementary infrastructural fundamentals as most of African societies are at the present time. I am of the position that, in the case of Africa, as long as an incumbent national leader is leading effectively, attending effectively to the expectations of that office in terms of the socioeconomic needs of the country, and leading with a sense of justice and fairness for all, that long-serving leader deserves to seek as many terms of office as possible, subject to the consequences of a free and fair electoral process. There are times when some of us appear as if we want to call a dog a bad name to hang it by our citing of only bad apples to buttress what appears like our reflexive opposition to electoral term longevity for given African leaders. For sure, Cameroon's current president demonstrably makes political longevity look like a bad egg; but citing his bad example without citing the counter-effective leadership records¹ of the Musevenis or the Kagames of the African political landscape is not a balanced argument.

Recommendations

In their diplomatic dealings with China and Russia, African countries must take care to guard against a replication of the types of exploitative relationships that have underlined much of African-Western pre-colonial and post-colonial engagements. Like the West, China and Russia are also on the lookout for their own strategic interests as they relate to their external world. Do African countries themselves need to be lectured on the need to also watch out for African interests as they forge alliances in our increasingly interconnected global economy? A question that African countries must ask themselves is whether African interests are best pursued and safeguarded with a united front or as 55 countries jostling and navigating a world replete with multi-billion-dollar

¹ It must of course be stressed that the Musevenis and Kagames of African politics would deserve this type of citation as exemplars as long as they abide by their own countries' rule of law and their own countries' constitutionally enshrined norms for democratic governance to ensure that the true will of the people ultimately determines the emergence and tenure of elected political office holders.

global corporations whose annual operating budgets tend to outstrip country-level annual national budgets of given African countries.

On their part, the West, China, and Russia need to think in more global human terms about their conceptualization of their “strategic” geopolitical and economic interests—away from narrowly constructed self-interests. The scourges of AIDS and COVID-19 that ravaged the world as a whole in our lifetime have taught us that there is really no country or region of the world that is a closed-off island unto itself. Let’s all begin to gear our strategic visioning towards not only what would maximize our individual national or regional socioeconomic and political interests, but also broadly towards a macro end of a sustainable global economy and a sustainable global environment where no component part would continue to languish in absolute poverty.

A need for Africa’s mental liberation

In sum, only Africa can liberate itself from the material and mental clutches of neo-colonialism. How can we possibly get to that destination? At all levels of learning, we need decolonized, African-centered education that can generate a sufficient mass of people within each polity that are imbued with victorious consciousness, a “we can do it” consciousness, a self-reliant consciousness, an African pride consciousness, and a consciousness of an indigenous capacity to solve emergent problems (as opposed to a consciousness that solutions are only possible from an external entity). A mentally liberated Africa would fertilize and propel an enduring system of governance that could routinely represent the will of the people. Towards this end, I will be remiss if, at this point, I fail to call attention to a major audio-visual intellectual crusade of our time for the emancipation of the neo-colonially entrapped mind of contemporary Africa that is being masterfully conducted by Professor PLO Lumumba at various fora across the continent, including university campuses. It is a timely crusade that has been mass-disseminated and amplified by social media (The PLO Lumumba Foundation, n.d.).² Professor Lumumba is a psychic tonic that is needed by all of Africa. Let’s hope that his ongoing erudite and eloquent lectures across the continent will help sow the seed for a continental psychological reorientation/revolution away from the neo-colonial worldview that pervades the continental African world, with, of course, some across-the-board pockets of exceptions. Professor Lumumba’s demonstrated multidimensional knowledge is breathtaking. It’s a joy and an object of awe to watch him speak extemporaneously and elegantly on myriad African internal challenges and myriad African external relations challenges. A rare gem, he is simultaneously intellectual and entertaining. As I watch him speak, I can’t help saying to myself, “This is a living and talking library of knowledge.” Let’s hope that through his tireless, historically layered, poignant, diagnostic, and prescriptive panoramic surveys of Africa’s contemporary socioeconomic and political circumstances, this exceptionally brilliant professor can ignite a movement towards an emancipated mass African consciousness. After all, the human experience suggests that it does not necessarily have to take a crowd of people to ignite a revolution in human perception of self. It just takes a persuasive messenger and a welcoming and attentive audience.

² To watch examples of Professor Lumumba’s audio-visual crusade, visit:
<https://www.youtube.com/@ThePLOLumumbaFoundation/videos>.

And once the will of the people begins to dominantly inform the bulk of Africa's electoral outcomes as a continental norm at all levels of governance, democracy will be animated as the true engine of a people-centered social development that it is designed to be. And the continental boat of Africa will be lifted as a byproduct. Therein lies what I mean by my working hypothesis that democracy is the key to Africa's social transformation. The fact that subversions of the will of the people, either through corrupted segments of Africa's ruling classes or through Western machinations enabled by African insiders, or both, have characterized the wobbly locations of African democratic experiments should not lead us to conclude that democracy in and of itself is not fit for Africa or has failed Africa.

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