



STRONG MEN **VS** STRONG INSTITUTIONS

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

PREAMBLE

The former President of the United States of America, Barack Obama, while addressing the Ghanaian Parliament during a courtesy visit to Ghana in 2009, remarked as follows: “No country is going to create wealth if its leaders exploit the economy to enrich themselves, or police can be bought off by drug traffickers. No business wants to invest in a place where the government skims 20 per cent off the top, or the head of the Port Authority is corrupt.

No person wants to live in a society where the rule of law gives way to the rule of brutality and bribery. That is not democracy, that is tyranny, and now is the time for it to end. Africa doesn't need strong men; it needs strong institutions^[1]

The above excerpt describes the socio-political climate prevalent in Africa. This article discusses the impact of strong men and strong institutions in the society and goes further to determine which one would help strengthen democracy in Africa.

A photograph showing a man in a green safety vest pointing towards a large chart or map held by others in a crowd. The chart appears to be a list of names or candidates with small icons next to them. The text 'THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY' is overlaid in large white letters on the image.

THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

Democracy has been defined as a government by the people, either directly or through representatives elected by the people.[2] Abraham Lincoln also described democracy as government of the people, by the people and for the people. Precisely stated, democracy is rulership by the people.

The elements of a functional democracy should therefore include the following: participation of the people either directly or indirectly, independence of the judiciary, separation of powers, the rule of law, the respect for fundamental rights, free and fair elections, multi-party system, freedom of the press, accountability, transparency of government officials, to name a few.

DEMOCRACY IN MODERN AFRICA

According to the 2018 democracy index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit,[3] based on the following democratic factors: electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of government, political participation, political culture and civil liberties;

Mauritius is the only African country that qualifies as a full democracy. According to the index, full democratic countries are nations where civil rights and basic political freedoms are not only respected, but also reinforced by a political culture conducive to the thriving of democratic principles. Such societies have a sound system of governmental checks and balances, an independent judiciary whose decisions are enforced, governments that function adequately, and diverse and independent media.

These nations also have only limited problems in democratic functioning.[4]

Still using the index, the second tier of democracies following the full democracies are the flawed democracies. African countries listed in this category include South Africa, Botswana and Cape Verde. The flawed democratic nations are nations where elections are free and fair; fundamental civil liberties are honoured,

but, there is limited freedom of the press. These nations have significant faults in other democratic aspects, including an underdeveloped political culture, low levels of participation in politics and problems in the functioning of governance.

In the third tier of the index are hybrid regimes. Countries such as Nigeria, Benin, Liberia, Uganda, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Ivory Coast, and Niger fall under this category. Hybrid regimes are nations where consequential irregularities exist during elections, thereby preventing elections from being free and fair. These nations commonly have governments that apply immense pressure on political opponents, have non-independent judiciaries, widespread corruption, constant harassment of the press and an anemic rule of law. These countries possess more pronounced vices than flawed democracies in the realms of underdeveloped political cultures, low levels of participation in politics, and issues in the functioning of governance.[5]

According to the democracy index, the Sub-Saharan Africa region is categorised as a hybrid regime while the Middle East and North Africa regions are described as authoritarian regimes.

Authoritarian regimes are countries which may have some conventional institutions of democracy but with meagre significance. In such countries, political pluralism has vanished or is extremely limited. These nations are often absolute monarchies or dictatorships. Infringements and abuse of civil liberties are commonplace.

Elections, if they do take place, are not free and fair, the media is often state-owned or controlled by groups associated with the ruling regime, the judiciary is not independent, and there are omnipresent censorship and suppression of governmental criticism.[6]

From the analysis provided by the democracy Index, we see that democracy in Africa is still a long way off mark. African democracies are currently characterised and threatened mainly by electoral abuse, ethnic divisions, corruption, poor management of natural resources and the collective effects of poverty, apathy, and economic insecurity

WHAT IS THE WAY FORWARD FOR DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA:

STRONG MEN OR STRONG INSTITUTIONS?

The importance of strong institutions in a democracy cannot be over-emphasised. Institutions are the governmental systems entrusted with making and enforcing the rules of a society, as well as regulating relations with other societies.

Democratic institutions are in essence, a set of arrangements for organising political competition, legitimating rulers and implementing rule. Institutions in a democratic government are necessarily the entities that will fulfil the elements of democracy that is: participation of the people either directly or indirectly,

independence of the judiciary, separation of powers, rule of law, entrenchment of fundamental human rights, free and fair elections, enable freedom of the press, ensure accountability as well as transparency of government officials.



Strong institutions are the cornerstone of stable governments. A democracy with strong institutions would be able to produce the essential elements of a fully democratic government through proper separation of powers thereby enabling a system which allows for checks and balances of the various arms of government.

For example, in a presidential system of democracy, it is essential that the judicial, legislative and executive arms of government work hand-in hand. Furthermore, these three arms of government must be independent and function separately at all times.

As a matter of fact, the stronger the judiciary and its inability to be influenced by the executive arm, the better the democracy. A credible instance is the South African example where the Constitutional Court of South Africa gave judgment against President Jacob Zuma, and the President accepted the judgment.

The Court ruled that the National Assembly of Parliament had failed in its constitutional obligation to hold President Zuma accountable.

The Court also ordered the erstwhile President and the National Assembly to pay the legal costs concerning the matter.[7]

This judgment was a laudable achievement for African democracy primarily because of the independence of the judiciary.

With strong institutions, it is easier for the press to be free because they can challenge any attempt of the executive to whittle down their freedom in the Courts of Law.

South Africa's institutions were also strong enough to investigate and indict the erstwhile President, who was put on trial for the allegations of corruption leveled against him, where he was accused of using public funds to finance non-security upgrades to his ancestral home.

The Constitutional Court therefore ordered former President Zuma to return the funds.

Having strong institutions in Africa would help to deliver free and fair elections, because the electoral commission and the monitoring bodies would be independent, and they would not be subject to the whims and caprices of the executive.

A strong and independent electoral commission would enable the citizenry trust in the government and enthusiastically participate in the political process, at the pre-election, election and post-election stages of the political process. Likewise, the rule of law thrives in a society with strong independent institutions.

STRONG MEN

Strong men have been ruling Africa since the departure of the colonial masters and individual countries have varied results to show for it. An example of a popular strong man and the effects of his “strength” in ruling a nation would be the former president of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, who strongly held on to power for almost four decades.

The aftermath of his dictatorship included gross economic mismanagement leading to the country attaining two world records for hyperinflation.[8]

The regime was further characterised by several human rights violations as well as anti-white racism. Some may argue that there can be no strong institutions without strong men. Again, some may argue citing the Rwandan example where President Paul Kagame has held the reins of power since 1994 and was elected to a third term in 2017 with 99% of the vote in his favour against two opponents, that it may indeed be possible for a society to thrive with strong men even if there are no strong institutions.

President Kagame and his forces in 1994, forcefully ousted the Hutu-led government that led to the Rwanda genocide where more than 500,000 persons were gruesomely murdered. Some may argue that in spite of the bloody manner in which he assumed power, President Kagame has delivered economic growth and progress in education to Rwanda with a business friendly environment and low crime rate.

Some may yet argue that President Kagame is another strongman merely going through the motions of democracy as elections in Rwanda have become virtually a formality for President Kagame’s perpetual presidency which is characterised by authoritarian rule with citizens fearful to speak their minds, advancing a case that strong men are capable of stifling democracy. Rather than strong men, Africa needs visionary leaders.

Democratic institutions that would outlast generations can only be built by visionary leaders and not strong men. Africa is where it is today because strong men ruled its weak institutions, allocated unchecked power to themselves and largely depleted its resources. However, if, Africa has leaders who build strong institutions, the democratic system will be strengthened and improve in spite of the weakness or strength of the person in authority.

A CASE FOR STRONG INSTITUTIONS

In closing, Africa requires capable, reliable, and transparent institutions; strong and viable legislature; honest police forces; independent judges; an independent press; a vibrant private sector and a civil society to give life to our democracy.

A quick observation shows that the economic prosperity and obedience to rule of law that exists in western countries can be attributed to functional strong institutions.

Huguette Labelle,[9] former chair of the board of the anti-corruption outfit – Transparency International, notes that two of the biggest threats to democracy in Africa are poor management of natural resources and electoral abuse.

These twin threats, she said, can only be overcome by having strong state institutions, a well-functioning justice system and a rule of law that works for everyone. It is therefore essential that African leaders implement legal instruments and standards that outlast them.

Africa also needs leaders that would responsibly develop its resources and focus on poverty reduction.

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