

# **THE CHALLENGE OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN PRESIDENCY TO THE STABILITY OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA**

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## **Abstract**

*The continent of Africa has suffered serious set – backs of growth and development for many decades. This has been due in part to lack of political will and commitment on the part of African leaders to work towards full democratization of African states, coupled with the colonial heritage of the past which African leaders for selfish reasons have refused to bury. With the election of Barack Obama, an African to the helm of affairs of the biggest democracy in the world the United States of America, there is every hope that African leaders will have to brave up to the challenges of showing exemplary leadership. While advising African leaders to respect democratic norms and principles, it equally advised them not to import wholesale, Western Liberal Democratic orientations into Africa in view of differences in culture and environmental conditions. The paper called on African leaders to strengthen all institutions of governance for Africa to regain its lost glory of being the first civilization in the world.*

The continent of Africa has witnessed in recent past, a strong wind of democratization blowing across it. This is not unconnected with the widely held view, especially by the West that no country can experience growth and development except such a country is fully democratized. African continent for decades had been under colonial rule and domination, a condition that was totally at variance with the practice of democracy. The granting of independence to most African states after much agitations by the people ushered in neophytes who were incapable of governing themselves due to lack of good education and experience. This accounts for African democracy being experimental till today.

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The Western powers have often accused African states of not accepting to democratize. They have failed to understand that where Africa is today was made possible by the West. This made Ofuebe (1998) to declare that one should be cautious about the clamours for democracy in Africa. According to him, careful examination of this phenomenon seems to indicate two tendencies; on one hand, there are internal forces attempting to revive populist democracy, on the other hand, democracy is being orchestrated by Western forces particularly those who have set themselves as the god-fathers of democratization in Africa. While democracy is vital for progress and development in Africa, the selfish agenda of the West should be separated from genuine efforts by Africans to democratize their continent.

The recent election of Barack Obama, an African as president of the United States of America is very significant to Africa as a continent and pose a challenge to the stability of democracy in Africa. As the cradle of world civilization, the election of an African to preside over the affairs of the United States of America, one of the most powerful countries in the world is a sign that Africa has started to reclaim its lost glory. To achieve this fully, African leaders must be ready and prepared to brave up for the challenge.

### **Conceptual and Theoretical Issues**

The concept of democracy is surrounded with complexities. From the liberal perspective, democracy is seen to be a universal concept with the same content for all people in the society. This is not acceptable. According to Emeh (2007), if democracy is universally conceived as such for all persons, then there will be no class struggle, no class antagonism, no marginalization of workers, no election rigging, no powerful groups representing weak ones, no discrimination on the basis of tribe, no unequal allocation of resources, no tribal conflict and no quota system. This is so because all these factors are central to democratic values.

Subscribing to the liberal view of democracy, Lipset (1963) sees it as a political system which supplies regular constitutional opportunities for changing the governing officials, and a social mechanism which permits the largest possible part of population to influence major decisions by choosing among contenders for political offices. In the same vein, Joseph (1991) states that democracy embraces notions such as popular sovereignty, consent, equality and representative government. These definitions, observes Emeh (2007) bring out two most important factors characterizing the concept of democracy from the liberal point of view. The first is an efficient electoral system which brings people into office, and which gets people out of office. The second is the principle of representative government. Liberal scholars believe that successful establishment of these dual conditions signifies the entrenchment of democracy. This view is indeed very naive and narrow, it ignores the class character of pragmatic political activity which has manifested in almost all general elections in African states.

In line with liberal thinking, American democracy which harbours a model that most African states and the world in general are clamouring for has four basic elements namely: political equality, majority rule, popular consent and popular consultation.

However, as Ofuebe (1998) warns that, we must guard against certain misinterpretations or misunderstandings which state that true democracy is always based on the rule of the majority. Democracy is inseparable from respect for the rights of the minorities by the majority. To discuss effectively the concept of democracy in Africa, the issue of the national question must be addressed. Because of the historical antecedent of nations, the national question is rooted in the history of nations. Democracy in African context necessitates careful examination of historical background of African states, the heritage of which provided the social base on which an enduring democratic state or society can be built.

To locate and understand the theory of democracy in Africa, it is pertinent to examine the conditions that triggered the emergence of democratic discourses. Inherent in all democracies are various struggles which engendered democratic discourses. Colonization of African states and domination of African sphere politically and economically by the Europeans and other Western powers paved the way for discourses on democratization of Africa. The control of African states by military dictators for many decades and the underdevelopment of the continent that resulted from it, equally contributed to continuous agitation for democratization of African states.

### **Military Rule and African Democracy**

The militarization of African States for decades created multiple problems for Africa in all aspects ranging from social, economic and political. Coups and counter-coups generated instability in all parts of the continent. The presence of the military in the political stage of any nation breeds more military interventions. Since the first military coup in Africa which occurred in Egypt in 1952, African states had been experiencing series of coups and counter – coups. This had been a blow on the stability of African democracy over the years. The military lacks the capacity to govern. By their doctrine and training, they are to handle weapons of warfare. The military's first assignment on successful overthrow of government is suspension of the constitution and abrogation of relevant laws that direct the political system. This eventually lead to distortion and dislocation in the implementation of government programmes (Mbachu 1998).

Most African states which have democratized are still confronted with myriads of problems. This can only be understood by looking at the time-lag between today and when the military left the political scene. Also, of consideration is the manner by which the military disengaged from the political scene. America that is today respected and worshiped as the leading democracy in the world, gained independence two hundred and thirty four years ago, and has gained sufficient experience in the practice of democracy. Through knowledge gained over the years as a result of rising and falling, making

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mistakes and correcting them, America has risen to become the cynosure of all countries throughout the world. This shows clearly the difference between America and states in Africa, some of which gained independence less than three decades ago and has been experiencing intermittent military coups and counter coups. Nigeria for example, is only fifty-one years old as an independent nation. Out of the fifty-one years of self rule, the military has ruled the country for twenty nine years. This number of years of military dictatorship has not been without havoc to the polity and psyche of Nigerians with the aftermath of remaining backward in democratic governance.

It is in recognition of the bastardization of the mentality of Nigerians that Mbachu (1998) subscribed to the need for Africans to develop high political culture that would instill in the citizens the attitude of political consciousness and political participation which would see military rule completely as an aberration. This can only be achieved through complete mental re-orientation of Africans in matters of politics and governance.

### **Leadership and African Democracy**

Bad leadership has been the bane that militated against African development for many decades. As Akpan (1999) point out, African leaders do not have clear cut principles on how to govern their countries, neither are they ready to accept certain principles and rules that are essential for a worthwhile democracy. This stems from the fact that their aspiration to serve is purely on inordinate grounds. This lack of altruistic motives by African leaders beclouds their sense of wisdom and renders them blind to their shortcomings. In the same vein, Anyanwu (1998) observed that most leaders in Africa are intoxicated by power to point of madness where every person, every object and every resistance must be crushed if only to remain in power. The aftermath of this has been a production of short-sighted leaders in most African states who have become permanent landlords in States-Houses. It is this unwholesome attitude of African leaders that has contributed to problems confronting democratization in Africa. Most African leaders are anti-democratic and authoritarian. They lack positive attitudes toward providing welfare services to the people and their mentality to this extent is retrogressive. This, like a tidal wave touches the entire continent of Africa and the result in underdevelopment of African states and poverty of Africans.

A very significant bane to African democratization which this paper cannot afford to ignore is the autocratic leadership style of most African leaders. Whether it is a re-production of colonial mentality and successive military rule in Africa by these leaders or self developed style of governance, most African leaders are autocratic in all ramifications.

While military leaders adopted it as a normal leadership style inherent in the doctrine and command structure of the military, military officers who eventually become civilian leaders found it difficult to adjust to civilian style of governance by permitting the principles of democracy to prevail even after they have transited from mufti to

Agbada and suits. By the same token, African civilian leaders seem to find joy and satisfaction in being autocratic in their leadership style to the extent of breaching some provisions in their various states' constitutions thus becoming insensitive to the need of those they govern. This autocratic and insensitive leadership style adopted by most African leaders cannot be seen as an African style because it is not peculiar to Africa alone and is not entrenched in the constitutions of African states. Rather, it is a self adopted style by most African leaders for their selfish, inordinate interests.

If Africa must experience effective democratization, it must produce humane leaders or those who are already leaders become humane in thoughts, words and actions and permit the principle of service-above-self to guide them. They must adopt a democratic-participatory approach to governance so as to carry everybody along.

### **The West and the Stability of Democracy in Africa**

It is generally acclaimed by scholars and non-scholars alike that African countries are facing the challenge of successful democratization. Several reasons are adduced for this failure, which includes, but not limited to corruption on the part of African leaders, lack of experience and insensitivity to the plight of Africa as a continent and Africans as citizens of the continent. This ugly situation has rendered the continent and its people impoverished, stagnated and undeveloped.

Before the emergence of colonialism which brought about the partitioning of Africa among foreign powers, African states had organized system of government which served the interest of the people satisfactorily. The system, when compared with the modern system may be considered crude or traditional but it served the interest of Africa and Africans very effectively in significant ways. Through communal living, everybody participated in governance. The problem of one person was regarded as everybody's problem. The coming of colonialism to Africa upturned the entire system and weakened the collective spirit of brotherhood of Africans. The colonial masters created various groups and designated them "tribes" thus creating enmity among Africans who, before then existed as brothers and sisters.

As Nnoli (1980) is at pains to point out, to justify their view of Africans, the colonialists categorized African linguistic groups as "tribe" and attributed to them differences in culture and way of life. What this implies is that the problem of instability of democracy in Africa is rooted in history and can be understood clearly from that angle.

Throwing more lights on this, Akintoye (1976) stated that colonial policies were aimed at preventing the growth of national unity. For instance, from the outbreak of the liberation wars in the Portuguese colonies at the beginning of the 1960's, the Portuguese caused or encouraged disunity or even hostilities among the people of their colonies. This was a strategy to weaken the freedom fighters. A case in point is what happened in the early 1950s when Britain was confronted with armed revolt in Kenya, where the incumbent president of the United States comes from. The British encouraged suspicion

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among the people of Kenya to weaken the revolt. Colonial powers subtly encouraged disunity or took advantage of existing signs of disunity in order to hold on to their colonies or to obtain independence on conditions favourable to them. Whenever colonial control was faced with serious threat, the colonial power adopted divide and rule tactic. This attitude of the colonial masters worsened the problem of national unity which African countries had to face. What we are attempting to establish here is the extent to which Western powers contributed to the problem of democratization in Africa.

The great lesson of history and a very significant one is the ascendancy of an African from once colonized region of Kenya to the exalted and revered position of president of the United States of America. The position of Barack Obama as president of the United States is a challenge to himself as an African and to all African leaders both incumbent and future in all countries of Africa. It is also a challenge to all Africans in diaspora. It is a sign of hope for eventual total liberation of the black man and woman sooner or later anywhere in the world. Barack Obama is saddled with the onus to prove to the world that the black man has all it takes to rule the world. What is expected of Obama is much greater than expectations from his predecessors. This is understandable and without dispute because Obama is a black man, specifically an African. Before now the West had never seen anything good in a black man, especially when it comes to leadership. Anything attributed to the black man was always seen as negative and devilish. The occupation of the “White House” by a black man is indeed a great feat. It has upturned the history of the black race in global politics.

In decades past, Africa represented a country of contrast with unending wars, conflicts and crises everywhere. For instance, the unending crisis in the Dafur Region of the Sudan which eventually led to a referendum to split the country into two, the Congo, the Zimbabwean and the Somalian crises. Nigeria has also had its fair share of crises, notably Jos crises in Plateau State, which has claimed many lives and has continued despite government effort to put an end to it. The planting of bombs in various parts of the country including that which occurred during the 50th independence anniversary celebration at Abuja. Corruption, electoral malpractices, kidnapping, fraud, inflated contracts and perversion of justice are all prevalent in almost all African States.

Sit-tightism has been another major problem confronting African continent as majority of African leaders have always refused to hand over power to their successors after free and fair elections. Nigeria is not left out in this experience. The 1993 presidential election in Nigeria which was adjudged to be free and fair, produced Chief M. K. O. Abiola as the rightful winner of that election. Unfortunately, that election was annulled by the military government of President Ibrahim Babangida. The current happening in Ivory Coast where the incumbent president Laurent Ghagbo has refused to step down for the rightful winner of that country’s presidential election, Allasane Quattara despite appeals from the international community is a re-production of the Nigerian case.

Despite all these, there is hope for the African continent. The current political developments in some African states signify the dawn of a new consciousness. Africans are becoming more politically educated and conscious to uphold a good government and reject a bad one. The recent case in Egypt in which the weight of the masses forced president Hosni Mubarak out of office after thirty years of dictatorship and autocratic rule as well as the rejection of Muammar Ghaddafi's autocratic rule in Libya by the people is a confirmation of the growth in political awareness of Africans.

The success of an African as president of one of the most powerful countries of the world is a call on all African leaders to rise up and take their rightful place in the scheme of things to ensure the stability of democracy in Africa. George Santayana in Akpan in (2009) had every reason to say, and rightly too, that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it. Since the present problems facing African States are legacies of the colonial past, African leaders should rise up to break the gene of the colonial past and proffer lasting solutions to African problems.

To succeed in attaining this feat, African leaders must strengthen the various institutions of government such as the judiciary, the police, the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the Independent Corrupt Practices and other Related Offences Commission (ICPC), and financial institutions such as the Banks. The judiciary is a very vital institution of government. It has very important role to play towards the successful democratization of African states. When justice prevails in all sectors of African society, the continent would automatically experience stability in its democracy. When justice is done, and is seen to be done, the police as an institution will live up to its responsibility through proper functioning, the electoral commissions will be transparent in conducting free and fair elections, and anti – graft commissions such as EFCC and ICPC set up by the Nigerian government will live up to expectations in carrying out their assigned responsibilities without fear or favour.

## **Conclusion**

In our contemporary world, democracy is accepted to be the best form of government. As an evolutionary process, democracy needs time to evolve to a point of perfection. This makes Mbachu (1998) to conclude that democracy should not be forced on the people, but should be gradual and dynamic in its internalization.

While Western democracy and the philosophical ideas behind it could be used to improve political governance in Africa, Western democratic model adapted to African conditions can only succeed with good leadership. This does not in anyway suggest the transplant of Western democratic model wholesale to the African continent. It is only suggested that the success of any model of governance from historical and empirical evidence depends largely on dedicated, committed and selfless leadership (Akpan 1999). The election of Barack Obama, an African as the first black president of America poses

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a great challenge to African leaders to sit up to their responsibilities. African leaders must do everything possible to ensure the stability of democracy in Africa.

The various institutions of government must be strengthened by African leaders in African states. They must abhor corruption in all its guise, because the bane of African development, over the years has been pointed to be encapsulated in the corrupt practices of its leaders. Since the success of president Obama in America will to a greater extent have positive impact on African leaders and Africa as a whole, it is incumbent upon president Obama and all African leaders to rise up to their responsibilities. Africa has always been the ruler of the world since the days of the great civilizations in Egypt. The election of Barack Obama to American presidency is the beginning of a new cycle in the world for Africa. African leaders must learn to be patriotic. Nigerians, and indeed Africans are among the worlds most unpatriotic people. This does not augur well for Africa, it accounts for most of the problems that the continent encounters (Achebe 1983).

True patriotism is possible only when the people who rule and those under their power have a common and genuine goal of maintaining the dispensation under which the nation exists. This will only happen if the nation is ruled justly, if the welfare of all the people rather than the advantage of the few becomes the corner-stone of public policy.

## **Recommendations**

Based on our discoveries in the course of this research, we proffer the following recommendations which if adhered to will contribute to stability of democracy in Africa:

- Adequate machinery should be put in place to check official corruption by African leaders. This is important because official corruption in Africa has been a cog in the wheel of development of the continent and should be abhorred in all its guise if Africa must make progress.
- Sit-tight syndrome of African leaders and their tendency towards institution of dynasty should be discouraged and totally rejected by the people since democracy thrives on popular participation of the people through periodic elections.
- African leaders should resolve to put into use the various contributions of Africa intellectuals especially those that emanate from conferences such as this. A lot has been written and published over the years by African intellectuals on how to stabilize and sustain democracy and good governance in Africa, but unfortunately, African leaders have consciously or unconsciously refused to make use of recommendations that originate from such conferences.
- Africans should learn to be patient with their leaders and with themselves. The process of attaining sustainable democracy is evolutionary and not revolutionary. Africans should give democracy enough time to evolve to a point of perfection for stability to be achieved.
- African leaders should learn to be selfless in service. They should abandon inordinate ambition and serve the interest of the masses. Since it is often said that



leaders are sent by God, it is without doubt that their divine mission should be to serve the collective interest of the people who are children of God.

- Justice should be permitted to permeate all sectors of African society. Institutions such as the police should live up to its responsibility, while institutions responsible for conducting elections should be transparent enough to conduct free and fair elections. These would contribute significantly to stability of democracy in Africa.

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