FUTURE OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY 11.07.2022 | Michael Abbey

The state of African social democracy

Africa is yet to fully flesh out a democratic order that responds to its specific history. The notion of 'ubuntu' has to play a central role here

Africa is an evolving democracy. The pace of Africa's democratic journey is parallel or similar to that of her struggling economic development. Recent successful (and, attempted) coups on the continent have generated conversations on whether Africa's democracy is winning, stagnating, or receding. Clearly, this begs fundamental questions on the state of Africa's democracy, ideological politics, and its practice of social democracy in particular.

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the inherent weakness and cracks in social protection and governance systems across the world. Regrettably, many governments exploited the pandemic to clamp down on civil liberties and human rights. Africa was no exception, if not the worst culprit.

Those who engaged in coups across the continent cited reasons such as growing corruption, poor governance, and closed or dwindling economic opportunities as their standard defence to disrupt the democratic or governance order. Africa experienced successful coups in Mali (two actually), Guinea, Sudan, and Chad in 2021. There was an unsuccessful coup attempt in Niger in same year. There is already another coup in 2022 – Burkina Faso. Clearly, the foundations of the democratic order in most African states still remain fragile. What does this mean for African democracy and ideological politics?

Democratic politics versus governance architecture

Democratic practice is characterised by at least five principles: a free, fair and just system of choosing and replacing political leaders within the confines of the law; the creation of deliberate safe spaces for active citizenry participation in the social, religious, political, civic, and economic life; the security and protection of the fundamental human

rights, including socio-economic rights of the people; the practice of rule of law in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all; and the nurturing and development of democratic institutions to uphold and grow the democratic norms, principles, and culture.

Ekeh argues that Africa is yet to fully flesh out a democratic order that responds to its peculiar historical antecedents and lived experiences.

Across the globe, successful democracies have properly defined an understanding of their type of democratic order or architecture, which is born out of their peculiar culture and lived experiences. In such a context, ideological politics can thrive on a non-contradictory, non-contentious democratic architecture which has been collectively agreed.

This appears not to be the case for Africa. Peter P. Ekeh's 1975 study *Colonialism and the Two Publics in Africa: A Theoretical Statement* aptly sums up the root cause of African democracy's challenges. Ekeh argues that Africa is yet to fully flesh out a democratic order that responds to its peculiar historical antecedents and lived experiences. He juxtaposes the era of pre-colonialism, colonialism, traditional governance as an informal public and the adopted, or rather, imposed Western liberal democracy as a formal public. His main point is that Africans have not been able to carefully and seamlessly consolidate these two publics into an effective democratic and governance architecture.

The two publics have their own positive and negative attributes. Whereas the African traditional governance system is said to have promoted consensus-based democracy, the Western liberal democratic system is believed to have promoted anti-consensus-based democracy with its highly competitive adversarial political system.

Again, 'accountability' as a Western liberal democratic principle is constructed, interpreted, and applied differently in the context of the informal public. Africa's traditional form of governance, specifically in the world of chieftaincy governance, pays little or no regard to issues of accountability. And, where such system endorses accountability, it is not available for every member or subject of society. This was also the case during colonial times.

How does this contradiction affect ideological politics in Africa today?

The role of ideological politics in Africa

Regardless of the place one belongs on the ideological spectrum – socialism, social democracy, liberal democracy, conservatism, et cetera –

one must be a democrat or adhere to the tenets of democracy in order to be accepted in the corridors of contemporary ideological politics. If ideology primarily refers to the ideals and values that defines a political party's world view on how society should be organised, then it will be defeatist to suggest that African politics is alien to ideological politics. Africa's traditional form of governance has promoted consensus. This largely flows from the communal nature of engagements of the family system in Africa.

Independence struggles in Africa were influenced by the movements that associated with the left ideologically, partly due to the fact that leftist ideology seems to resonate with the struggling masses, the marginalised, exploited, and disadvantaged in society. Indeed, the concept of 'Ubuntu' known to most regions of Africa – Eastern, Southern, Central, and Northern – places emphasis on common humanity, oneness, collectivity, and communalism as the building blocks of society.

Stemming from the zulu phrase 'Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu', *ubuntu* simply means 'I am, because you are'. This clearly epitomised the idea of solidarity and social justice which are the legs upon which a social democratic welfare state is built. Africans, however, lost the opportunity to allow this beautiful (political) ideology to evolve on its own with the mad rush for Westernised political ideologies.

Many political parties profess to be social-democratic without, first and foremost, living the basic tenets of democracy, let alone social-democratic values.

With the advent of political parties after the politico-economic detachment from the colonial masters and navigating the corridors of military regimes, most countries at the time were one-party states with strong affiliation to communism and socialism. Today, there are countries in Africa that are multi-party, two-party, dominant party, and a few still being one-party. There are African countries with over 50 registered political parties. These parties have evolved from being predominantly leftist oriented to center-left, centrist, and far-right political parties.

It is, however, the case that most contemporary parties in Africa still claim to be socialists, while a good number also professing conservative liberal ideologies. Indeed, it is not surprising that the Socialist International (SI) and Christian Democrat International (CDI) are the international political organisations with the most African member parties. There are over 20 African countries having full membership and observer membership status within the SI.

Africans' communal nature of living, consensus-based form of traditional governance, and leftist-oriented movements for independence struggles on the continent explain why most political parties on the continent have adopted socialism or social democracy as their political ideology. But the question is what does it really mean to belong to or profess to be a socialist, social democrat, liberal democrat these days?

And, social democracy?

One could have expected that – given three to five decades of ideological politics in Africa – social-democratic political parties on the continent would have been actively busy with the promotion and development of a welfare state on the continent. Unfortunately, this is no more than a mirage. Many political parties profess to be social-democratic without, first and foremost, living the basic tenets of democracy, let alone social-democratic values.

The development literature suggests that any developing country needs a political ideology or governance style that resonates with the values of social democracy, since the objective reality of a huge disadvantaged and marginalised population necessitates social protection systems, safety nets, and a welfare state in general. However, whichever way one looks at it, one is greeted with a seeming complicated 'gordian knot'-like puzzle of a governance architecture that inhibits and stifles real development hinged on clear-cut social-democratic tenets and values.

Clearly, until Africa genuinely begin to address her governance architecture challenges vis-à-vis the two publics, it will be uneasy to leapfrog into real development undergirded by ideological politics. The notion of 'ubuntu' – which is closest to social democracy than any of the Western political ideologies – must be given high recognition and allowed to evolve through the political space in shaping the ideological worldview of Africans. Until then, self-proclaimed social-democratic governments and parties will continue to use the label without providing public goods that really meet the aspirations and needs of the people.



Michael Abbey

Accra

Michael Abbey is a political and development strategist and currently a Programmes Coordinator at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung – Ghana Office. He has over ten years experience in the arena of politics and development. He holds a Bachelors Degree in Philosophy and Sociology, Bachelors of Law (LLB), Masters in Public Affairs, Masters in Migration Studies, and Masters of Law, International Trade Law (LLM).