

## Weak institutions are the bane of democracy in Africa

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### Introduction

Recent reports (Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index 2022; Economist Intelligence Unit Democracy Index 2021; Freedom House Report 2021; and V-Dem Institute Democracy Report 2022) underscore the general state of democratic decline in Africa. This is often described using terms such as democratic erosion, collapse, rollback, backsliding and decay. The transition of authoritarian regimes to democratic rule between 1974 and 1990, which saw an increase in democratic activities in Africa within the same period, was dubbed the ‘third wave of democratization’ by Samuel Huntington (1991: 12). The hopes that heralded this period, such as deepened legitimacy, economic growth, social and political reform, social mobilization and increased political participation, have been dashed. In a manner that suggests a reversal trend, the popularity of democracy in Africa has become ensnared by the prevalence of authoritarianism – including, recently, through digital tools, otherwise known as digital authoritarianism. More so, the democratic gains recorded, since the adoption of democracy have been hit by a recession to autocratic rule. One is then forced to ask: is democracy the problem? Is it possible that the Western style of democracy is not suitable for governance in Africa, or could it be that African leaders are generally undemocratic and adept at authoritarian rule? Can democracy in Africa be salvaged? Is democracy the solution to the wave of autocracy that presently pervades the continent? Indeed, these questions are endless and cannot be answered in this piece. However, this essay argues that democracy in itself is not the problem, but rather weak democratic institutions.

## Could democracy be the problem?

For one, democracy, nay, the semblance of democracy has failed in Africa as evidenced in the rise in military coups, sit-tightism, constitutional coups, third-termism and electoral violence – inter alia. Meanwhile, the majority of these aforementioned sociopolitical oddities are given impetus by weak institutions. As suggested in the literature, the blight on development in developing nations is weak institutions which makes it difficult for governments to enforce laws, guarantee service delivery, promote good governance, enforce accountability and realize the equitable distribution of resources (Nyamadzawo 2019). Meanwhile, the failure of the government to promote the aforementioned engenders bad governance which is inimical to democratic growth.

Democracy is a system of government that emphasizes majority rule. To be sure, democracy advances the principles of free and fair elections, citizen participation, human rights and the rule of law (Diamond 2004). Therefore, the peaceful transition of government, broad-based citizen participation in decision-making, the protection of human rights and the entrenchment of the rule of law – which are requisites for social cohesion, sustainable development and civic engagement – are predicated on the successful operation of democracy. Given its ideals and principles, it will be wrong to assume that democracy impedes political development. Doing this will mean ignoring the risks posed by authoritarian rule such as lack of accountability, political repression, suppression, surveillance, a crackdown on the opposition, political unrest, rebellion and security volatility – inter alia (Hutchins, 2020). If democracy is then not the problem, it would mean that its practice in Africa is faulty; owing largely to the prevalence of weak institutions.

## Weak institutions in Africa

Institutions are an integral part of any political society. It consists of systems that make rules that guide human behaviours and ensure the structuring of the resulting behaviour to promote social interaction, order, cooperation and economic progress (Nganje 2015). Institutions are therefore responsible for lawmaking and adherence to such. States with resilient political institutions produce strong laws, while poor laws are associated with states with weak institutions. Meanwhile, institutions can only be effective when they are independent, free from control, accountable and transparent. Concerning accountability and transparency, the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (IIAG 2020) report shows that between 2010 and 2019, 3 (Central Africa, East Africa and Southern Africa) out of 5 regions in Africa recorded a decline (see table 1).

**Table 1: Accountability and transparency in Africa**

Location	Average Trend (2010-2019)
Central Africa	-1.5
East Africa	-3.5
North Africa	+5.6
Southern Africa	-1.6
West Africa	+5.9

Source: IIAG (2020)

### **Weak institutions as a bane of democracy**

The success or failure of democracy in countries is tied to the ability of the state to deliver political goods; these being citizens' expectations of the government. Political goods include 'enforceable rule of law, security of property and inviolable contracts, a judicial system, and a set of values that legitimize and validate the local version of fair play' (Rotberg 2016: 3). It also includes creating an enabling environment for citizen participation in politics. Meanwhile, the provision of these goods is a function of strong institutions. Therefore, the prevalence of weak institutions will lead to a deficit in political goods thus increasing the risk of democratic recession.

There is no gainsaying that the records of elections, participation, human rights and the rule of law in Africa are low due to weak institutions (Yagboyaju & Akinola 2019). Weak institutions foreshadow political crises, especially in an ethnically diverse society as found in many African states. The identity-superiority contests that characterize such societies are anathema to democracy. For instance, the recurring contestation and violence between the ethnic groups in Nigeria not only hinders national integration but impedes the country's democratic progress (Yagboyaju & Akinola 2019). More so, in weakly institutionalized societies where powers are concentrated in the executive branch, the leaders are often unrestrained and may seek to overpower other institutions of government in a bid to ensure a continued stay in office or unfettered access to state resources. This was experienced in Tanzania where President Kais Saied suspended the parliament in March 2022 (Pérez-Peña 2022).

In a state with weak institutions, the mechanisms of controlling social conflict are also weak and may often result in contestations that, when not properly handled, evokes civil

unrest, and in some cases, military coup. The return of military coups in Africa, particularly in Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Sudan (2021), Chad (2021) and Burkina Faso (2022) has been blamed on failed state capacity and poor economic performance (Zeigler 2021). Also, societies with weak institutions are characterized by the inability to control corruption and state capture which limits economic growth and encourages autocrats to take power or sponsor the circumvention of term limits to ensure an indefinite stay in office. Yet, states with weak institutions are also vulnerable to internal shocks (competition for scarce resources, identity-based crises, inter-clan armed conflict, militias, corruption, military takeover) and external shocks (regional influence, lack of political will and support from western countries). A case in point is Somalia where dynamics such as competition for resources (water, livestock and power), militias, colonial legacy and military repression – among others, led to state collapse (Third World Network 2011).

## Concluding remarks

Democracy remains the most viable option for ensuring freedom and majority participation in decision-making. Despite this brazen submission, the recent spread of authoritarianism around the world suggests that democracy may be failing. Democracy may not be perfect and may have arisen as a western construct with limited applicability in Africa. Democracy may also appear to be waning and becoming unpopular in many African countries. Nonetheless, the principles upon which the notion is built remain astute. Since democracy is a product of the interaction of institutions that produce rules that guide human behaviour towards political and economic progress, the problem of democracy lies within the institutions. As such, African leaders must work assiduously to build strong institutions and not strong men. The various political institutions must be enhanced to make relevant laws that seek to improve living conditions as well as enhance service delivery. Institutions must also be strengthened to espouse the principles of accountability, transparency and inclusion.

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