

Term Limits Is a Defeatist Approach that Escapes the Major Question of Electoral Justice

Since the 1990s, western governments have been pushing for democratisation in Africa. They often express frustration that Africans are not “getting it.” Even their capacity building seminars and conferences have not helped the democratisation project the way they thought of it. However, there could have been much progress had those who lecture Africans about democracy considered the possibility that they are the ones who are not getting it. The liberal one-size-fits-all template was never going to work. The reasons for that seem obvious, and it would take a dictatorship to continue pushing a failed model. Here’s why.

For something to work, context matters. The same is true for democracy, which is presented as one form, among others, of a governing framework guided by a number of principles and values, and culminating in elections. Any system of government ought to evolve within a society’s historical context and as a response to those unique challenges that democracy is designed to solve. This is how democracy evolved in the West.

Consider the contentious issue of term limits. For much of the slightly over 240 years since the American constitution was ratified in June 1778, there were no term limits in that country’s political system. It wasn’t until February [1951 that the 22nd amendment that limits presidents to two terms in office was introduced](#). For perspective, this is over 170 years later, and also before any African country was independent. Franklin D. Roosevelt served four presidential terms from 1933 to 1945 and died in office. Indeed, it is conceivable that,

had it not been for poor health, Roosevelt could have served more terms, especially given his popularity at the time. Getting Americans triumphantly out of World War II and the Great Depression, and his impressive record of socioeconomic transformation, especially the introduction of the welfare state as part of the New Deal, endeared him to the people.

How do Americans account for the 170-year delay to introduce presidential term limits? Were they under dictatorship during that long duration? If they want to be sincere, they acknowledge that it is the context of War that made it necessary for Roosevelt to stay and die in office. In other words, they concede that democracy, and even term limits, evolve within a country's specific context, history, and competing priorities. Another of the other rare "democratic" countries with presidential systems, France, introduced term limits only in 2008. Clearly, there is no inherent sanctity in term limits. In fact, when questions are asked about the American Senate system where Joe Biden served for seven terms from 1972 to 2009, there are no satisfying answers. Senators and members of the lower houses are also prone to nepotism and corruption, and they are subject to capture by special interest groups that prevent them from serving the interests of those who elect them. If it were Africa, the story of Joe Biden would have been about his longevity in power from the early age of 29.

However, Biden's longevity as Senator of Delaware is accounted for by the fact that at no single time was his vote in the senate elections lower than 60 percent. In other words, he – like Roosevelt before him – remained popular with his electorate. Of course, to accuse Biden of being power hungry would be to disregard context and history.

Therefore, term limits are a defeatist approach and simplistic way of escaping the major question of electoral justice. In a society where there is electoral justice (that is, a fair system where peoples' votes count), an electoral commission

that is constituted to ensure fairness, and where people can vote out a leader once they are fed up with him or her, one doesn't have to bother with term limits. On the other hand, term limits can become a hindrance when people genuinely want to keep their leader in power because they still trust him or her to get the job done. In this instance, term limits stand in the way of the democratic wishes of society. In other words, where there is electoral justice, what people vote for is what counts, and how long leaders stay in power is irrelevant. Hence, our democratisation journey in Africa should focus on electoral justice, not term limits.

Term limits as a one-size-fits-all approach to politics were introduced in Africa as part of an externally-inspired reform package, and are considered the most important sign of democratic performance. The media, civil society, and even the people, always closely follow every leader at the end of his/her official mandate, to see if they will or won't go beyond the two-term constitutional limits. But term limits inherently carry two questionable assumptions. One, it is assumed that an African leader cannot, by himself, without any external constraint or pressure, relinquish power and hand it over to the next leader. This, of course, doesn't stand scrutiny.

The second questionable assumption is that when leaders stay long in power, it is necessarily bad for a country, its population, and its institutions, despite the avalanche of evidence to the contrary. Most radical reforms and national transformations took place under visionary leaders, thanks to their longevity in power. In fact, to see radical transformation taking place in the span of one or two terms is exceptional.

In many instances, term limits are merely an artificial, psychological comfort in the absence of accountability. For instance, the world is replete with examples of leaders who are elected by less than 50 percent of eligible voters, even

30 percent in the worst cases. This happens in the so-called established democracies in the West mainly because a significant part of the population has become too disillusioned with the status quo to bother casting their votes. Moreover, in political systems where one or two parties have dominated the political scene for decades, changing the heads of government without changing the logic of governance can only add to the disillusionment. For instance, it makes little difference to vote for democrats or republicans if the vote has been stripped of its ability to bring about the change that the people want. It is cosmetic; it is indeed artificial comfort to believe that there has been change when it is only the faces of those at the helm that change, not the systems.

Two-party system

Similarly, efforts to export the two-party system where governance is reduced to a performance of musical chairs ought to be questioned. Politics in Africa, unlike in the West, does not reflect ideological divides. Therefore, it is wrong to try to draw similarities with the west. Because we have no competing value systems – the way liberals and conservatives are organised in America, France, Britain, etc, or the way the global north was divided between capitalists and socialists. In most cases in Africa, there are methodical issues; political parties are merely special purpose vehicles for competing elite groups. That's why we have mobility of politicians (pejoratively called turn coats by those they spun) from one party to another as opposed to the West where one person belongs to the party of their ancestor and passes it to their offspring. Clearly, on our continent, the divide is not ideological as such, which is a good thing. Africans should celebrate the fact that they don't have fundamental ideological disagreements and shouldn't seek to emulate others who are having intractable problems because of them. In Rwanda, for instance, the government has been telling people

that they hold no ideological differences and that they shouldn't confuse criminal discourse for acceptable political ideology.

Perhaps, because our history doesn't create that situation where, at some point, we had a feudal class – that constituted almost a political divide – dominating other sections of society, capitalism and scientific socialism remain alien concepts. In Africa, we had colonialism under which we all suffered and upon independence we were – and still are – struggling with our socioeconomic issues which affect us all, and over which we differ only in terms of how we approach solutions. Of course, that can cause frictions from one election to another, but those frictions don't constitute radical ideological divides. Therefore, even the argument that there is no political opposition because, in some instances like Rwanda, people have agreed on the basics (the consensus model) and chosen to work together doesn't hold. The point is, unlike in the West where people are forced into coalitions to gain numbers, in Africa, it is easier to form coalitions because our pursuits are the same. There are no fundamental disagreements.

It follows that the current approach to democratisation in Africa is an intra-party (not multi-party) competition or contestation. When electoral justice is lacking, the contestation can turn violent and will most likely follow identity lines because there are no indigenous, organic and irreconcilable competing ideologies to organise around. Such issues cannot be resolved by term limits.

Furthermore, it is disingenuous to characterise an African leader who is elected by 99 percent of the population as authoritarian while brushing aside as mere imperfection of democracy a situation where [a European leader is elected by members of his party that represent less than 0.5 percent of the country's population](#). Surely, a rational person wouldn't conclude that only one of these two approaches produces

undemocratic outcomes. They operate in different contexts much in the same way that some African countries have evolved into a situation where term limits work for them. For others, term limits have turned into a game of musical chairs with little to show for the democratic outcomes of improving people's lives.

In all these cases, the lesson is simple: Africans shouldn't uncritically emulate systems that have failed elsewhere, especially by looking for problems we don't have in our societies, such as ideological divides. All successful societies have examined their contexts for democratic inspiration. For such alien systems to be replicated in our societies, we need to also import the problems they were designed to resolve. Yet, we are currently lucky not to have issues similar to those they are trying to find answers to, as they are ripping their societies apart.

The lesson that the West should help Africa learn about democracy is that it emerges from and evolves within a particular context, as it did in the West's own circumstances. This calls for a change in attitude; otherwise, we shouldn't expect any real change. However, continuing to push democracy as practised in the West into Africa is like throwing good money into an obviously bad business.