

# Time To Rethink 'Democracy' in Africa

It was the fart heard around the world. The Speaker of a regional Assembly in Kenya had to suspend proceeding because, wait for it, one of the representatives had farted. Yeah, you read that right. "Honourable Speaker, one of us has polluted the air and I know who it is," Julius Gaya, one of the members is [quoted by the BBC](#) to have said. This was democracy at work, let's remember. These are elected representatives, and I assume that's what the assembly's 'rules of procedure' stated must be done in a scenario like that one.

Now, many ridiculous things have [happened](#) in parliaments around the world of course, but for some reason Africa tends to steal the show for breaking the decorum of the hallowed grounds that these grounds are supposedly meant to be. There was the comical [swearing in](#) of elected councillors [in Uganda](#) which went [horribly wrong](#) because, according to the Ugandan law, with roots in colonialism, all elected leaders must take the oath of office in English. And then there is the debate over whether Africa Judges should still wear wigs. All these are symbols of modern statecraft supposedly wrought about by democracy.

They say people deserve the leaders they get. Is that so? Is there something else we should be looking at in Africa?

Let's get more real. Almost all African countries have been holding 'elections' for the last fifty years. What has this symbol of democratic governance done for us? Jeffrey Smith, The director of pro-democracy organisation Vanguard Africa recently wrote an [article](#) in the Washington Post in which he called on donors to 'prioritize democracy over development in Africa'. Mr Smith's argument is hinged on the assertion that democracy leads to development and not vice-versa. His

arguments might be right in certain contexts but falls flat in a vast majority of the others, atleast when it comes to Africa.

It is hard to find a country more democratic (if democracy means holding regular elections and peaceful transfer of power as Mr Smith seems to implicitly argue) in Africa than Nigeria, at least in the recent past. Or Ghana. Or Kenya. And yet these remain some of the most corrupt countries in the world. Nigeria has one of the biggest concentrations of people living below the poverty line in the whole world. On the contrary, the Middle East, currently the top destination of Africa's unemployed youths, is not democratic.

What is apparent is that Western Style Democracy simply hasn't worked in Africa. African rulers discovered long ago that they didn't have to quarrel with donors over whether or not they should hold elections. They decided they would, but make the system so difficult that it is virtually impossible to defeat incumbents, with just a few exceptions.

Most African leaders, even those democratically elected still run their countries as if they were kings. The precolonial royal court was replaced with a 'State House', servants with 'advisers' some so many that they never get to meet the president, and when they do, in the words of a Ugandan comedian, 'it is the president who advises them'. They have bloated their governments to create jobs for their cronies so much so that, on a recent trip to Nigeria, I counted over 30 'boards,' 'authorities', 'commissions' and 'councils' in just one sector/ministry. Each of these has a chief or chairman, executive and staff, appointed by the president, and generous perks including fat salaries, huge fuel gazlling 4x4s and escorts.

Just like it was in the ancient kingdoms of Ashanti, Dahomey, and Buganda, most Modern 'elected' African presidents are modern day Asantehenes, Kabakas and Nyungu Ya Mawes who, like

their ancient contemporaries have absolute power, including in some cases, the power of life or death.

These presidents realised long time ago that they didn't need to fight with IMF, World Bank and the western governments that hide behind these institutions, over mere 'elections'. Their repression became more subtle after seeing what happened to Bokassa and Amin. Instead of crushing the skulls of their opponents, (even though some still do it to on a small scale when push comes to the shove) they will appoint their own electoral commissions, [refuse to deliver ballots](#) in their opponents' strongholds on time, or simply amend the constitutions to rule for life, or cancel their opponents' eligibility to run against them.

All of which brings me back to the million dollar question: Is Western Style Democracy really suitable for Africa? There are a few examples of governments in Africa who are delivering development, aided by a strong executive authority, or what some might call 'strongmen.' They are raising uncomfortable questions for democracy proponents in the West: Does a leader who governs undemocratically but effectively deserve to be given a seat at the table in Washington and London? Is there something we can learn from them?

What is true is that Western donors are currently looking at China's incursion into Africa with a jaundiced eye. Here is a country where the D-word doesn't even begin to apply, but which has lifted a billion of its citizens out of poverty in just 20 years. Shouldn't this country be the target of learning excursions by leaders around the world? Of course the answer is no, because its model is not western

Western Democracy enthusiasts forget important context-specific issues when it comes to Africa's democracy. America has been a democracy for over 200 years, Britain has been run under democratic tenets since at least 1215 AD when the Magna Carta was signed. To think that you can transplant these

principles into a continent that just 100 years ago was being run under tribal aristocracies, and expect them to run as efficient is to miss the mark.

To conclude, I am not saying that democracy is not important. But having the right to vote while living in huts, dying of medieval diseases, illiterate and broke is useless. Someone who hasn't eaten isn't thinking about how free or fair the next elections are going to be. Prioritising democracy over development is akin to putting the cart before the horse. I would wish for a situation in which both go side by side. Unfortunately, history doesn't offer lots of examples where that has effectively worked. Africans will have to figure out for themselves what is the best for them. Some of that 'figuring out' might be bloody. But where else was it not? The feudal Europe Revolutions or The American War of Independence? These weren't beer parties and I have no illusions of how hard the struggle by Africans for self-determination is, and is going to be. What I detest is for some know-nothing 'expert' sitting in Washington to tell me how I should lead my life.

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