The Initiation and trajectory of Democracy in Sub-Sahara Africa: a snapshot of the literature

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The march to freedom and the right to self-rule for many African countries has been an inconsistent experience (Svanikier, 2007). This is due to the fact that the colonial struggles for freedom that culminated into the declaration of independence for many of these states did not produce the desired postcolonial governments (Frank & Ukpere, 2012). Many of the governments that took over the reign of governance were short lived due to the many military takeovers that swept across the subregion. This paper looks at the initiation and trajectory of the democratic experiment in Sub-Sahara Africa.

Discussion

By the year 1966, Ghana, the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to gain political independence in 1957 had experienced its first military coup d'état (Boafo-Arthur, 2007). Benin, Mali, and Nigeria were in a similar political state by the end of that decade. These incessant coups d'état were precipitated by the inability of the postcolonial governments in these nations to deliver the political, social, and economic goods expected by the citizenry (Ogude, 2012; Simcic, 2013). For instance, in Ghana, some scholars have argued that the desire by Dr. Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, to institute a lifetime presidency led him to declare Ghana as a one-party state (Boafo-Arthur, 2007). Additionally, the institution of the Preventive Detention Act (PDA) in 1958, which gave the government the power to detain political opponents without trial, and the worsening economic and political conditions have been cited as the reasons for the military overthrow of the Nkrumah regime (Boafo-Arthur, 2007). Similar reasons have been given for the coup d'états in Nigeria and Mali (Frank & Ukpere, 2012).

However, by the turn of the new century, Sub-Sahara Africa's political landscape had changed (Bates et al., 2012). The rejection of autocratic rule and the push for democracy as the preferred system of governance had gained traction in the subregion; constitutional democracy and electoral politics had become the order of the day. Some countries had held multiple political elections by the turn of the century (Bates et al., 2012).

In spite of these positive developments, many sub-Saharan Africa countries were still under dictatorial regimes clothed in the fabric of electoral democracy (Crawford & Lynch, 2012). The push to rid the subregion of these "autocratic democrats" plunged many Sub-Sahara African states into interstate and intrastate conflicts which have undermined the democratization process in Sub-Sahara Africa (Crawford & Lynch, 2012). Therefore, the democratization process in Sub-Sahara Africa in particular, and the African continent in general, has been inundated with challenges that has made the process uneven and complex (Ndi, 2011).

Scholars of democracy have debated the initiation and trajectory of the democratization process in Sub-Sahara Africa since the inception of the third wave of democracy which swept across the continent in the late 1970s and the early 1980s (Edozie, 2009). The debate has mainly pivoted around four crucial points: (a) economic and political dimensions, (b) external and internal factors, (c) contingent and structural factors, and (d) contemporary and historical dynamics.

External and Internal Factors

Scholars who argue that democratic transition in Sub-Saharan Africa is as a result of internal factors emphasize that prodemocracy movements and political protest were fueled by massive underdevelopment and economic hardships coupled with the disintegration of the postcolonial state's legitimacy and capacity (Abdul-Gafaru, 2009). On the other hand, those who postulate the external forces argument posit that IMF conditionalities as part of the structural adjustment programs and the fall of communism in Eastern Europe made democracy an attractive option for these states. Political transition to democracy as a system of governance by sub-Saharan countries was one of the conditions emphasized by multilateral financial institutions in exchange for financial bailout (Austin, 2010; Olutayo, Olutayo, & Omobowale, 2008). It is important to note that some scholars have raised doubts about the international community's commitment towards Africa's democratization process; they have asserted that some of the conditionalities are tailored to serve the interest of donors as opposed to that of the recipient nations (Behrouzi, 2008; Weintstein, 2008).

Contemporary and Historical Dynamics

Similarly, other scholars have viewed Africa's transition to democracy through two distinct lenses within the context of history. One school of thought holds the view that the demand for democracy in Africa was inspired by the global demand that swept the entire world (Gilley, 2009; Gylfason, 2013; Mattes & Bratton, 2007). In the opinion of these experts, even though each region of the world had peculiar factors that precipitated the push for democratic rule, the primary spark was the victory that democratic hegemonic powers had secured around the world (Gilley, 2009; Mattes & Bratton, 2007).

On the contrary, other scholars posit that Africa's push for democracy was inspired by the region's historical struggle for freedom. Therefore, the agitation for democratic governance was a continuation of the historical struggle to free Africans from all forms of oppression (Coleman, 2014; Elvy, 2013).

Contingent and Structural Factors

Another point of divergence among scholars is the extent to which Africa's democratization is a product of individual actions as opposed to structural factors. Supporters of the individual actions approach emphasize the roles that certain individual leaders played in Africa's democratic transitions. This school of thought focuses on human agency in tandem with contingent factors as the ultimate instigator of democratic rule in Africa (Ahlman, 2011; Azikiwe, 2009; Biney, 2008). Those who espouse the structuralist view, on the other hand, posit that structural conditions such as economic underdevelopment, rising levels of political awareness among citizens, and increasing rejection of colonial legacies facilitated Africa's democratization process (Pierce, 2009; Wittner, 2007).

Political and Economic Factors

Furthermore, there has been a debate on the question of whether the democratization process in Africa is attributable to political or economic factors. The school of thought that believes that the democratization process in Africa was ignited by political conditions points to the failure of postcolonial governments' inability to forge nationhood and prevent political disintegration of their respective countries on ethnic lines (Alemazung, 2010; Havlik, n.d.; Mann, 2012). The political crisis that ensued as a result of these failures did not only create disenchantment among the citizenry; it energized civil society to demand greater accountability, which culminated into the push for democracy in the various African countries (Boafo-Arthur, 2008; Porter, 2011).

Conversely, those who posited that the democratization process in Africa was precipitated by worsening economic factors argued that the dwindling economic fortunes of the ordinary African, coupled with the failed development agendas of postcolonial governments, was the primary stimulus for the push for democracy (Austin, 2010; Simensen, 2008). Analysts have asserted that economic programs spearheaded by the World Bank and the IMF exacerbated the already precarious economic situation of the African people (Harbeson, 2012; Jauch, 2012). Therefore, social groups and democratic movements seized the opportunity to press home their demand for political and economic accountability to the masses in the form of democratic governance.

Irrespective of the lenses through which one views the democratization process in Africa, the general consensus among scholars is that democracy as a system of governance has not been consolidated in Africa as expected, especially in West Africa where the political system has been marred by electoral violence and political machinations (Alabi, 2009; Alemika, 2007; Asamoah, Yeboah-Assiamah, & Osei-Kojo, 2013). With the exception of Ghana where elections have been held successfully six consecutive times without violence, most West African nations that experienced democratic transitions have been plunged into some form of political violence (African Union Election Observer Mission, 2012; Alabi, 2009; Alemika, 2007).

Many scholars have documented cases of political violence precipitated by elections and fueled by ethnic divisions (Alabi, 2009; Alemika, 2007; Anyangwe, 2013; Basedau & Stroh, 2012; Bates et al., 2012; Boafo-Arthur, 2007). For instance, Ivory Coast, which was one of West Africa's most stable democracies, plunged into political violence in 2010 when the incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo refused to cede power to the opposition party that had won the elections in Ivory Coast (McCauley, 2013). It is important to note that election observers, both foreign and local, had declared the elections free and fair (African Union Election Observer Mission, 2012; Borzyskowski, 2013; The Carter Center, 2010).

Similar cases of electoral fraud and machinations have been reported in Nigeria, Mali, and Gambia (Nathan, 2013). In an era where most of these West African countries are deemed democratic, studies have reported biased electoral institutions and corruption at the highest level of government coupled with incidents of compromised judiciary (Alabi, 2009; Alemika, 2007; Nathan, 2013). In many of these countries, the freedom of the media to disseminate, educate, and inform the citizenry has been restricted by the coercive power of the state (The Economist, 2011; USAID, 2011). The competitiveness and fairness of the electoral systems have been called into question in many of these West African states, and many of the leaders who ascended to power by riding the tidal wave of democracy passed laws to perpetuate themselves in power (Mariam, 2010).

Conclusion

Taken in totality, the democratic experiment in Sub-Sahara Africa, at best, has stagnated; in that, the various governments have not created the enabling environment for citizens to participate freely in the political process (Alabi, 2009; Alemika, 2007). Political participation and citizens' engagement in the public sphere are critical ingredients of democratic societies (Ampofo, 2008; Atuahene & Owusu-Ansah, 2013); however, governments in the West Africa subregion either lack the political will to ensure free participation of the citizenry or restrict such engagements for political expediency (Alemika, 2007).

Many West African states have not fared well on the various democratic and governance indexes that are used to measure democratic performance (Transparency International, 2014; The World Bank, 2014). As already known, democracy as a system of governance encompasses elements such as liberty, rule of law, economic and social equality, free participation in the political process, free and fair elections, freedom of religion and association, and freedom of the press (Alemika, 2007; Landa & Meirowitz, 2009). Judging by these standards, it is important to state that with few exceptions, the West African subregion has not performed to the expectation of experts and citizens alike (Mwale, 2013).

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