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Introduction: The Contradictions and Ironies of Elections in Africa

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Abstract

This introduction interrogates the popular meaning attached to elections in a liberal democracy, where they are generally regarded as expressing the political and civil rights of the citizens. It argues that contrary to this popular view, elections in Africa have become arenas where the elite contest for the consent of the people to exercise state power. The people on their part perceive elections as the entry for securing development projects to improve their material conditions. To this end, the elite employ various mechanisms such as intimidation, election fraud, and primordial identities like tribe and religion to bend election outcomes in their favour. Added to these is poverty, which is employed by the elite to reduce the people to dependency within the framework of clientelism. The result is that elections in Africa tend to confer popular consent on the exercise of state power, but only in the formal sense; in reality elections produce 'choiceless democracies'.

Résumé

Cette introduction s'interroge sur le sens populaire attribué aux élections dans le contexte d'une démocratie libérale, où ces dernières constituent généralement une forme d'expression des droits politiques et civils des citoyens. Cet article affirme qu'en Afrique, contrairement à cette conception populaire, les élections sont devenues une arène où les élites se disputent le consentement des populations, dans le but d'exercer un pouvoir étatique. Les populations, quant à elles, perçoivent les élections comme une opportunité permettant de bénéficier de projets de développement susceptibles d'améliorer leurs conditions matérielles. Pour arriver à ses fins, l'élite déploie divers mécanismes tels que l'intimidation, les fraudes électorales et les identités primitives (tribu et religion), afin d'influencer les résultats électoraux en leur faveur. S'y ajoute la

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pauvreté, utilisée par les élites pour rendre ces populations dépendantes à leur égard, grâce à un réseau de clientélisme. Le résultat est qu'en Afrique, les élections ont tendance à attribuer au pouvoir étatique un statut de consentement populaire, mais ceci n'est fait qu'à titre officieux, car dans la réalité, les élections engendrent des « démocraties sans choix ».

Since the last decades of the twentieth century political scientists have been making references to the Third Wave of Democracy in the World, implying a succession of democracy projects globally. This claim may be true of other parts of the world, but for Africa the current wave of democratisation may be described as the second, the first having occurred as part of the independence movement. However, like the first, the current wave is also dominated by elections; but while the first was the symbol of the transition from a colonial status in which Africans were a subject people to independent nations in which the people became citizens, the second has become a symbol of the birth of democracy. In the first instance, the idea of the nation embodied the emergence of people who claimed unqualified entitlement to full citizenship through the struggle for independence. The received wisdom during the period of the anti-colonial struggle was that the nation embodied the collective right of self-determination; therefore, it was only within the framework of the nation that a person could realise the rights of a citizen – that is, be free 'from economic, social and political exploitation and in some cases, down-right slavery' (Mamdani 1995: 43-62)[1] and be equal to all in rights and dignity. Hence the demand for citizenship was expressed as a demand for independent nations, and the sense of belonging to actual nations was amplified in the struggle for self-determination.

Elections epitomised this maturity for self-determination, and linked the claim to citizenship to the attainment of independent sovereign nationhood. The extension of the franchise to all adults was the ultimate act that conceded the people's claim to citizenship. These were epochal demands; because colonialism had denied the people their citizenship – including their basic social, economic, cultural and political entitlements. The denial of the right to national self-determination was the highest expression of the people's subjugation to foreign rule and exploitation. In another sense therefore the struggle against servitude was also a struggle for universal equality (Mazrui 1970: 11–40).

By the 1970s the nationalist project had been compromised and the people were again subjected to conditions of virtual servitude. The continent's political class had been driven by their iconoclastic propensities to destroy the new institutions for self-government that the people had built during the struggle for independence. With the complicity of the so-called development

partners as well as the kleptocrats that had colonised the state bureaucracy, they had allowed their insatiable appetite for power and wealth, and their ineptitude, to plunder their countries. In the process they had reduced the continent to a Fourth World status where the crises of poverty, disease, civil wars, famine, illiteracy and ignorance were rampant. And for the second time the people rebelled against the state in a struggle for freedom and citizenship. Once more elections became the means by which the people would struggle for their birthright.

In this essay I explore the essence of elections in the current wave of democratisation in Africa. I argue that, in contrast to the popular meaning of elections as a struggle for liberation from the harsh economic and social conditions which have become their daily experience – a struggle for citizenship – the political class has reduced elections to an intra-class contest to exercise legitimate state power based on the consent of the people expressed through free and fair elections. They have ingenuously developed mechanisms for appropriating it to advance their long-standing project of political and economic domination of the majority.

Elections as the pursuit of citizenship

In most African countries voter turnout is usually higher than the world average or what prevails in developed democracies. The reason is simple. Elections are not about civil and political rights even though an election affirms the existence and enjoyment of such rights. The preservation of civil and political rights is normally associated with the security and judicial organs of the state. It cannot be assumed that in Africa elections afford citizens the possibility of affirming their political and civil rights: the anti-colonial struggle was the moment for affirming such rights. Rather, the current wave of elections provides an opportunity for citizens to advance their economic and social rights, either through the election of an executive president or parliamentary representatives, or both. The indubitable fact is that even under current liberal regimes, the state controls enormous economic resources for social distribution. The citizens therefore turn out in their numbers on polling day to secure representation in the central theatres of power – the executive and legislature – two organs that participate directly in deciding the distribution of public resources. The needs that citizens use the ballot to secure could range from food security, the assurance of a stable and reasonable income, access to health and education, as well as other economic and social services and factors. Such needs may be determined by the interest of a community, social class or group, or individual. When these social and economic rights are violated, in addition to violations of civil and political liberties, the people

resort to civil disobedience of various kind and degree to reassert their sovereignty.

A number of questions arise from this. For example, do democratically elected governments have the capacity to meet the basic material needs of their people? Also, are the people sufficiently organised and autonomous to make sovereign choices – for example, to choose and change their government? The first question concerns the economic capacity of the state, and poses a serious dilemma. The persistent economic crisis facing most African countries and the ineffectiveness of the IMF/World Bank sponsored economic reforms have reduced the capacity of governments to provide the people's material needs, and cast dark clouds on the stability and institutionalisation of democracy. The danger stems from the hard fact that the people may perceive poor economic performance and the failure of elected governments to deliver on their promises as the failure of democratic institutions to address their basic rights. This could impair popular commitment to democratic norms and attitudes which determine popular political action. The dilemma lies in the fact that, unlike civil and political rights, the courts cannot compel governments to meet or respect the social and economic rights of the people. The value of democracy lies in the manner in which rules and procedures are applied to ensure the orderly and legitimate transfer of power. Where democratic institutions fail to meet the material expectations of the people, instilling the norms and procedures that govern democratic action becomes problematic and a convenient justification for some leaders to exploit popular disenchantment to corrupt democratic institutions or subvert them. The challenge therefore is to ensure that the pursuit of equity and justice forms an integral part of market reforms in order to strengthen popular commitment to the ideals, norms and attitudes that sustain democracy.

Elections as sovereign choice[2]

This dilemma leaves political action as the only option available to citizens for exercising their sovereign right to participate in their governance and hold their governments accountable. It leads us to the next question which is about the capacity of the people to make sovereign choices. In a democracy elections are the most effective means for exercising such sovereignty. They are based on the presupposition that the ordinary men and women possess the ability to make free and rational decisions or choices. The essays contained in this issue contest any such optimism about the degree of rationality and freedom exercised by citizens in participating in their government. The essays caution against hasty and festive conclusions about the democratic credentials of African countries on the grounds that second or third elections have been held.[3] An objective study of elections reveals that a number of structural,

ideological and political factors impose severe limitations on the choice exercised by the electorate and thereby compromise the integrity of competitive elections as the ultimate political means employed to choose or change their leaders, as well as effect changes in policy.

In theory elections are a method for choosing and legitimising a government. The truth is that in most African countries elections provide opportunity for manipulating the prevailing ethnic, religious and regional divisions to achieve victory. As happened recently in Ethiopia, a party may win a majority of seats in parliament and yet fail to represent the whole country. Or the victorious party may form a government and yet lack nationwide legitimacy. In Ghana's 1969 elections, for example, the successful party lost all the parliamentary seats in one region on ethnic grounds. In the 2000 and 2004 elections, the same party (under a different name) lost the same region (and secured just a few votes in three other regions) also for reasons of ethnic politics. In effect, primordial identities like ethnicity and religion have become part of the ideology of domination by which the political class manipulates the electorate to enhance their electoral fortunes. The power of the ideology of tribalism is clearly illustrated in Wanyande's paper on Kenya. He argues that it is not just the political class that seeks to manipulate ethnicity to bolster its chances in the power contest; the electorate have also accepted the definition of elections as a contest for ethnic hegemony. Accordingly, they do not just expect to see a member of their own ethnic group contest either as a presidential or parliamentary candidate; they also mobilise to vote for such a candidate.

Political parties are often formed on the basis of tribe. If, as in Nigeria, elections produce sharp ethnic alignments, the results could be potentially destabilising. The aggrieved ethnic group could play the secession card. The Côte d'Ivoire crisis illustrates the worst scenario in electoral politics that feeds on the manipulation of ethnic solidarity – which is civil war or the threat of it. Whether it is in such extreme cases as Nigeria or others like the situation prevailing in Kenya and Ghana, one thing is clear: elections fail to provide an opportunity for choosing a government that represents all the people or enjoys the consent of the national electorate. Therefore the claim that elections confer either full legitimacy or assure stability is questionable.

A classic case of electoral politics that is bereft of salient canons of democracy is represented by Nigeria. The chapter by Agbaje and Adejumobi puts the point beyond the pale of doubt that Nigeria's elections have been taken over by political barons or godfathers who, with the complicity of the political class, rape elections and steal the people's verdict in the name of democracy. They argue that even before elections are held the faction of the political class that controls state power for the time being ensures that the

results are rigged through various strategies of manipulation, falsification, control, intimidation and, in some cases, through the use of violence or threat of it. Various factions of the political class, comprising retired military officers, retired bureaucrats, career politicians and tribal and religious ideologues have constituted themselves into cabals controlling the structures that produce such political banalities. They systematically undermine the political capacity of the people through tribal and religious ideologies, and through poverty, ignorance and illiteracy. In the end the masses have become mere instruments for legitimising the power of the powerful rather than democracy.

Apart from the fact that elections do not provide the electorate with the opportunity to consent to who should govern them, they also create a dilemma of power for the political elite. The dilemma stems from the exercise of power without full authority to govern, especially where the threat of instability or civil disobedience becomes real. The felt collective grievance that there has been a denial of choice in an election is one of the factors that underpin the widespread post-election conflicts and other forms of civil disobedience which have characterised the return to democratic politics. Where a regime's authority is uncertain, 'the maintenance of authority is the immediate problem'. The solution to the problem of legitimate authority is sought through the use of the institutions of law and order: the bureaucracy, the police and the military (Rose 1978: 211). The recent situation in Éthiopia where the regime tried desperately to impose its authority, especially on the capital city, Addis Ababa through violence is a clear illustration of this power dilemma.

Africa's political class greatly appreciates the value of elections as a legitimising institution in so far as the exercise of political power is concerned. This is why elections were held religiously even under one party regimes. In the current conjuncture when democratisation has become a global ideological project, the need to secure international approval has placed a much greater premium on elections – especially elections that will be certified by the international community as having met the criteria for exercising free choice. Consequently, in many countries diligent steps are taken to give elections the façade of free choice even when in reality the choice of the people is manufactured by the political class itself (Rose 1978: 263). The articles on Egypt (by Thabet) Kenya (by Wanyande), and on Nigeria (by Agbaje and Adejumobi) show clearly how ruling parties solve the power dilemma in the name of free and fair elections. Such parties have developed sophisticated techniques for manipulating and influencing the electorate to vote for them. In some cases they resort to intimidation and coercion. The armoury of instruments for manipulation, influence, intimidation and coercion include a

combination of state agencies like the bureaucracy, the police, the military, and the state-owned media. Grassroots political entrepreneurs and opportunists are also actively employed in some instances to secure the vote of the electorate.

In countries such as Egypt (in the article by Thabet), Zimbabwe (in the article by Makumbe), and Cameroon, it is clear that the claim by the ruling parties that they organise competitive elections in which the electorate are able to freely choose who should govern them is questionable. In reality the regimes in such countries have imposed tight controls over the system to ensure that elections would confer *legitimate authority* on them to govern. In Egypt the various electoral laws enhance freedom of choice only in the formal sense; in practice the ruling party takes it away by other means; in Zimbabwe the institutions established by law to manage elections and ensure democratic choice are firmly controlled by the regime and used to manipulate and distort the choice of the electorate. And in Nigeria, the law, political parties, regulatory bodies like the electoral commission, and many others (including informal structures of power – like the political patrons) are employed to steal the people's verdict. Such hegemonic controls tend to produce 'exclusionary elections'[4] in the sense that they limit competition and exclude other elites. The other effect of such controls and manipulations is that they remain 'consent elections'[5] only in the formal sense. In reality, the outcome of such so-called competitive elections is a 'choiceless democracy': (Mkandawire 1999: 122-30) the electorate are not free to determine who should rule them. In the words of Gaetano Mosca, 'The representative is not elected by the voters but, as a rule, has himself (or herself) elected by them'.[6]

The postulate that elections produce choiceless democracies casts grave doubt on the autonomy of the electorate. In developed countries like the USA, Germany, France and the United Kingdom, where the electorate can exercise a good measure of autonomy, the choices people make in the political arena have considerable weight as well as meaning: the people can make real choices at the polls. That is, their vote can determine who wins or loses an election. Their vote can even change or influence the course of public policy. In between elections their opinion counts in the public spaces where the political class makes decisions. Because of the weight carried by the vote and opinions of the electorate, the political class is compelled to actually compete for their vote and/or pay close attention to their opinions. In Africa, a combination of underdevelopment, poverty and hegemonic controls exercised by the state over society have the effect of rendering the electorate dependent on the political class, and more especially on the state. The electorate are easily subjected to manipulation and influence by the political

class through political parties but generally through the state both of which express the hegemony of the political class.

Ethnicity and other primordial identities provide ready frameworks for elite manipulation, control and domination of the electorate. They are complemented by other vertical forms of the elite–mass relations that are based on economic considerations whereby the elite exploit the poverty and underdevelopment of the masses for political advantage. In many African countries the patronage networks involve powerful ruling politicians or parties and communities who exchange votes for development projects. In South Africa, according to Habib and Naidu (in this collection) the electorate tend to vote on the basis of socio-economic status – to be more specific, on class basis. Granted that this is a valid postulate, it could also be argued that in a country where low socio-economic status coincides more or less with race/tribe, surely race/tribe cannot be an irrelevant or insignificant factor in determining the overwhelming vote that the African National Congress, a political party formed largely by Black South Africans for their liberation and domination of the national political space, has been garnering at the polls since 1994.

I have earlier described ethnicity as an ideology of domination. I must include poverty and underdevelopment in the ensemble of this hegemonic ideology exercised by the political class over the society in general. There is a massive literature on African politics of the 1960–70 period which describes such vertical relationship between Africa's political class and the masses as clientelist. The social, economic and political environment in which clientelism was constructed has persisted. In a number of countries poverty has become acute, and identity politics centred on ethnicity and religion have become a marked feature of national politics. Clientelism is intrinsically a relationship of unequal partners – a relationship between a patron and client. Therefore even if the relationship is reciprocal, the client is a weaker actor in this partnership. Poverty and underdevelopment have emaciated the political capacity of the clients much further. In fact the resurgence of ethnic and religious identities is, in many cases, linked to a sense of injustice and marginalisation. Further, acute poverty and underdevelopment explain why the relationship between Africa's electorate and their political classes has become grossly instrumental. Thus in the same country communities, groups and individuals compete with one another to support and vote for politicians in exchange for development projects – potable water, schools, health posts or clinics, roads and bridges for communities, and jobs for the youth. I have argued elsewhere that poverty diminishes the capacity of the citizen to exercise effective citizenship.[7] Ineffective citizenship is underpinned by the people's

lack of autonomy which has enabled the political class to manipulate, divide and retard the growth of the former into a political force.

Concluding remarks

Does the crucial fact that the people do not make a sovereign choice or decision at the polls make elections irrelevant to the political process and its development? On the contrary, the purpose of this Introduction has merely been to highlight the contradictions and ironies embedded in elections as a vital instrument for the attainment of democracy, and not to denounce them. It must be emphasised that the value of elections in the current democratisation process does not lie in their classical function of ensuring an orderly choice of who is to govern, and conferring legitimacy on those chosen to govern. In the first wave of democratisation elections were the instrument for asserting the full citizenship of Africans who had lived under the bondage of colonialism for centuries. In the current wave of democratisation elections occupy a fundamental position in the struggles against autocracy and slavery such that each successful election marks a vital step in the politics of liberation. Richard Rose has argued optimistically in these words: 'The very fact that an election is held, even without choice, is a tribute, however hypocritical, to the idea of government by consent' (Rose 1978: 211). I will argue that the optimism about elections lies rather in the determination of the people to struggle till they secure social and economic liberation, and political freedom.

There is also one value attached to elections in th. For peoples who have lived under undemocratic regimes of various kind, suffered oppression and other forms of brutalities, the freedom that democracy epitomises is priceless despite all its limitations. The freedoms that democracy embodies become manifest during an election: the freedoms of association, choice, speech, movement; the right to participate and differ, the right to peaceful assembly and other latent fundamental human rights are brought alive and exercised by the citizens, including the franchise itself which expresses the fundamental equality of the citizen. In a very real sense therefore elections are not a mere celebration of the fundamental rights of the citizen to be free. They affirm a commitment to the rule of law which is a venerated icon of democracy, and a battle cry which rallies the oppressed people to the battle front to struggle against their oppressors (Cohen and White 1997). Elections in a democracy have this hidden value; and it is this embedded power that excites and mobilises both the political class and the masses to renew their commitment periodically. By reaffirming their commitment to the rule of law they affirm their own freedom.

Notes

1. Mamdani (1995) has critiqued contemporary democratic struggles for also bearing this agenda that the nation is the sole platform for realizing citizenship.
2. The following analyses have benefited immensely from Hermet, Rose and Rouquie (1978).
3. See for example Diamond and Platter (1999), especially Michael Bratton (ibid) where it is suggested that second elections put a country past the threshold of democracy, and assure sustainability.
4. S.P. Huntington and C.R. Moore (1970: 15), quoted in Guy Hermet (1978: 5).
5. Ibid: 7.
6. Quoted in Hermet (1978: 2).
7. I have argued elsewhere that the market reforms have precipitated the growth of poverty into an intractable social crisis. See my chapter 'Markets and democracy' in K. Boafo-Arthur (ed.) *Ghana: A Decade of Liberalism*, Dakar: CODESRIA (forthcoming). The situation in a number of African countries is similar to that which prevails in Ghana.

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