

## **Mwalimu J.K. Nyerere on the Road towards Democratic Elections in Tanzania**

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### **Abstract**

*Mwalimu Nyerere has often correctly pointed out that for democracy to work properly, it must shape its mechanisms to suit the culture, the conditions and current circumstances, and also the nature and purposes of a nation and its people. In line with this view this paper contends that elections when held freely and fairly are tantamount to a litmus test not only of public support for current government policies and programmes and electing political leaders, they are a reflective of the will of the people and are thus a cornerstone for a vibrant democracy. Democracy was a principle held dear by the late Mwalimu Nyerere, unfortunately, the experience of the 2010 elections and those before it demonstrate that elections in Tanzania are becoming a stumbling block to a flourishing democracy. The aftermath of these elections has been characterised by evident discontent by opposition parties and the public at large. Claims of rigging of results and corruption as well as a declining voter turnout are testimony that elections in Tanzania are not yet a key route to a vibrant democracy. This paper advances the view that Tanzania needs to move forward on a road that will lead the country to establishing a more vibrant democratic society. This can be*

*possible by not only revisiting Nyerere's ideas on democracy, but to also put his ideals into practice so as to make democratic elections a reality. This will without doubt be a fitting tribute to the late father of the nation.*

***Key words:*** *Democracy, Elections, Democratic elections*

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## **1.0 Democracy a principal pillar for elections and development**



Attempting to define “democracy” is often a very difficult task. Democracy has developed over the course of history and is present in many different forms today. Literally speaking,

democracy is rule by the people, of the people and for the people. The methods by which this rule is exercised, and indeed the composition of “the people” are central to the various definitions of democracy, but useful contrasts can be made with oligarchies and autocracies, where political authority is highly concentrated and not subject to meaningful control by the people (Olum, 2010).

President Abraham Lincoln of the USA has perhaps provided the best-known definition of democracy. By “government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” he meant, the essentials of democratic government he so well described are applicable to all nations that aspire to a democratic society.

The term democracy is also often used to denote a system of rule based on free and fair elections, the rule of law and the protection of individual freedom and rights. Martin (1995) defined democracy as a political system that supplies regular constant opportunities for changing governing officials. Robert A. Dahl (1971) argues that the fundamental democratic principle is that when it comes to binding collective decisions, each person in a political community is entitled to have his/her interests be given equal consideration (not necessarily that all people are equally satisfied by the collective decision).

Nyerere provides a more comprehensive explanation of democracy. He states that “Democracy is more than a matter of majority rule, true democracy requires that minority views be respected and that everyone be given an opportunity to express their views freely and openly.....every new thing starts with the support of minority.....True democracy demands that the minority have such freedom.” (Nyerere, 1974)

The fundamental and basic principles of democracy thus include the principle of participation and the principle of emancipation. We contend that democracy in the African context should be able to emancipate people from authoritarianism, oppression, domination and exploitation. Democracy should also mean freedom from hunger, poverty and disease. The process of emancipation should go hand in hand with the process of participation whereby people are able to participate in processes of decision-making, implementation and evaluation of all matters that concern their lives including practical socio-economic and cultural matters.

Other principles of democracy include people's empowerment; free and fair elections; the rule of law; freedom of speech, press, worship, movement and association; having a government with fair distribution of powers between the executive, the legislature and the judiciary; and observance of basic human rights. Putting into practice these principles of democracy has always been difficult, particularly in regards to democratic elections.

## **2.0 The Concepts of Elections and Democratic Elections**

Democracy and elections are closely connected. An election is commonly understood to be a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. Elections have been the usual mechanism by which modern representative democracy has operated since the 17th century. Elections may fill offices in the *legislature*, sometimes in the *executive* and *judiciary*, and for *regional* and *local government*. This process is also used in many other private and *business* organisations, from clubs to *voluntary associations* and *corporations*.

Today there is common agreement that all modern democracies hold elections, but not all elections are democratic. Right-wing dictatorships, Marxist regimes, and single-party governments also stage elections to give their rule the aura of legitimacy. In such elections, there may be only one candidate or a list of candidates, with no alternative choices. Such elections may offer several candidates for each office, but ensure through intimidation or rigging that only the government-approved candidate is chosen. Other elections may offer genuine choices--but only within the incumbent party. These are elections but they are not democratic elections. (Issachroff, 2007; Catt, 1999; Yirel, 2011). While the concept of elections is easily understood, the issue of democratic elections is much more controversial and has caught the attention of a number of scholars.

Jeane Kirkpatrick (1984), scholar and former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, has offered this definition of democratic elections: "Democratic elections are not merely symbolic....They are competitive, periodic, inclusive, definitive elections in which the chief decision-makers in a government are selected by citizens who enjoy broad freedom to criticise government, to publish their criticism and to present alternatives."

What do Kirkpatrick's criteria mean? Democratic elections are competitive. Opposition parties and candidates must enjoy the freedom of speech, assembly, and movement necessary to voice their criticisms of the government openly and to bring alternative policies and candidates to the voters. Simply permitting the opposition access to the ballot is not enough. Elections in which the opposition is barred from the airwaves, has its rallies harassed or its newspapers censored, are not democratic. The party in

power may enjoy the advantages of incumbency, but the rules and conduct of the election contest must be fair (Kirkpatrick, 1984).

The issue of democratic elections in the African context remains very challenging. It is no wonder that some scholars have characterised the emerging democratic system in Africa as merely an ‘election democracy’, much less than the democratic establishment that Africa requires at this point in time (Anyang’ Nyong’o, 2007). This leads us to the important questions of what are democratic elections in the African context and what institutions are necessary to uphold such elections. These are burning questions that the late Mwalimu Nyerere makes an important contribution to. Mwalimu Nyerere correctly observes that developing nations need democracy, but the need and necessity of democracy in these countries should come from within according to geographical necessity, maturity etc ..... and the internal situation of Tanzania is ready for Transformation (Nyerere, 1977).

The message from Nyerere is clear – democracy in developing countries such as Tanzania is of extreme importance. However, that this democracy and democratic elections in particular require that they are founded on existing socio-economic and political conditions prevailing in these countries. Nyerere further cautions that “We make a mistake to imagine that we can import democracy like coca-cola or a readymade garment ..... But ideas about democracy and democratic institutions are not divine truth, they are to be accumulated and absorbed into the blood stream of the people and institutions through which ideas ..... grow out of people’s own practice” (Nyerere, 1977).

The term democratic elections in this paper will be understood to imply going beyond the holding of regular elections for instance general elections in Tanzania after every five years or as in the case of the USA after every four years. We hold the view that it is not enough to have free and fair elections to have democratic elections; democratic elections must lead to a flourishing democracy. Democratic elections appear to be the desired goal of many but the reality speaks otherwise. It is estimated that more than a billion people in the world are casting their votes in elections to choose their rulers and representatives in parliaments. Yet few elections can be actually described as democratic and competitive elections, the rest cannot be depicted as democratic. Many world leaders have and continue to manipulate the election process in order to achieve goals other than those derived from democratic elections, mainly to obtain legitimacy and to ease internal and external pressure for democracy and the respect for human rights (Catt,1999).

Baregu (2009) points out that in a competitive democracy, periodic elections play at least two functions. One is to offer citizens an opportunity to express their preferences for parties, policies and representatives. The other is to legitimise the elected government as an expression of the popular will. He further observes that is why everything possible must be done to ensure that elections are not only free and fair but also that the outcomes are acceptable to all. This would be even better served when the losers spontaneously concede victory to the winners.

To ensure successful democratic elections, Mwalimu Nyerere emphasised time and time again the need for participation of the public in elections. One way of ensuring that election results express the popular will of the majority of the citizens, is to

register as many people as are eligible to vote and create conditions that encourage the registered voters to turn out and cast their vote on polling day. Voter turnout is one key indicator of how much confidence people have in the electoral system particularly in its ability to deliver acceptable results. Declining levels of voter turnout, therefore, are a clear indication of decreasing confidence in the electoral process. Democratic elections in most African countries face a number of challenges before they become a reality. The most burning of these challenges is corruption.

### **3.0 Corruption a Major obstacle to Democratic Elections**

Challenges confronting Africa's democratic experiments are many and complex and include entrenching constitutionalism and the reconstruction of the postcolonial state. Falana (2008) points out that to move Africa forward, emerging democratic governments would have to confront a legacy of poverty, illiteracy, militarisation, and underdevelopment produced by incompetent or corrupt governments. Overcoming corruption is viewed as a major obstacle to democratic elections.

Elections in many African countries are increasingly being undermined by corrupt practices. Corruption in elections includes vote rigging, illegal political contributions to political parties, bribing of election officials, bribery within political parties for the chance to be nominated to stand for elected office, bribing the electorate through the use of money, gifts, etc. Abuse of public roles, procedures, or resources, by officials or by political parties who seek to influence them to gain political advantage is also part of corruption in the electoral system.



It is now generally acknowledged that corruption in elections undermines the legitimacy of the electoral process and gives way to mistrust conflict and despair on the part of the citizens. It is further argued that growing corruption in elections breeds distrust in a situation where rights and protections are no longer believable and dependable. As corruption increases, the very right to express oneself politically is subject to a price. Corruption in elections helps to solidify the notion in many people's minds that politics itself is a sham--that one's rights and choices are illusory, and that the only hope of change lies in engaging in corrupt practices or the destruction of the system (Kopoka, 2002).

#### **4.0 Nyerere on the need for a constitution to meet the demands of the people**

While addressing the last meeting of the 1965-1970 Parliament on 6<sup>th</sup> July 1970 Mwalimu Nyerere not only surveyed the work that Parliament had done, he discussed the importance of elections in a socialist society as well as the requirements of the Tanzanian system. In this speech Mwalimu Nyerere highlighted the importance of holding elections “under a constitution drawn up by us, and designed by us to meet our own needs and circumstances. Mwalimu correctly observes that “it marked a great change” (Nyerere, 1974).

Highlighting the need for a constitution to meet the demands of a changing society Nyerere explains “For Tanganyika began independence in December 1961 with a constitution drawn up at a time when TANU was concerned exclusively with one thing--independence. For that reason we concentrated on the powers of the Governor-General; the control of the government over the civil service, the police and the army; and on the relationship

between the judiciary, the people and the government. In addition, British agreement to our constitution was necessary. For all these reasons the Independence Constitution of Tanganyika was neither particularly suited to the needs of our development nor was it entirely ours. Yet it achieved our purposes” (Nyerere, 1974:174).

From the above paragraph, the late Mwalimu Nyerere clearly illustrates the importance of a vibrant constitution to an electoral system which is appropriate to, and desired by the people. This is of paramount importance in this current day and age when demands for a new constitution are becoming more and more vocal from the general public in Tanzania and other African countries.

The recently (2010) ended elections in Tanzania have demonstrated that democratic elections are very much about water, food, jobs, shelter, education and improving the livelihood of the community. It is about organising communities, and rallying the people to the kinds of action which will increase the supply of these goods and services to the people - all of the people. Nyerere (1998) correctly observes that people are not fools. When the rains fail, or El Nino causes the floods, they do not blame their government. What they do demand is that their government brings emergency food supplies, or helps them to rebuild a bridge, or do other things by which they can overcome the disaster. Nyerere further argues that the people will not accept an excuse for inaction by the leaders on the plea that the IMF wants their Government to give first priority to the servicing of their country's foreign debt.

Democratic elections should result in high voter turnout where the voters will be able to reject political leaders who have failed to live up to their elections. We contend that the extremely low voter turnout of less than 50 percent of the registered voters and the inability to throw out failed leaders is a clear reflection of absence of democratic elections in Tanzania.

### **5.0 The Road towards Democratic Elections: What can Tanzania do to enshrine Democratic Elections?**

The struggle to introduce democratic in elections in Tanzania is an uphill battle, which must nevertheless be fought and won. There is need to re-examine Tanzania's electoral process with the aim of making changes to the system so as to minimise corruption in elections.

The following are suggestions on what needs to be done in order to ensure the introduction and sustainability of democratic elections in Tanzania:

#### **(a) Introduce an open, responsive and effective electoral process**

There is little doubt that Tanzania is in urgent need of an open, responsive and effective electoral process as a basis for democratic elections. This will in part require at a minimum, a significant amount of citizen trust in officials, in institutions responsible for overseeing elections, and in each other. An open electoral process will mean that people are allowed to nominate candidates of their choice to stand for election and free to campaign vigorously their own political agenda. This was the late Mwalimu Nyerere's understanding of democracy and democratic elections.

Nyerere provides a strong message on the way forward for all aspiring democratic countries in Africa when he argues that “An essential ingredient in democracy is that it is based on the equality of all the people within a nation's boundary, and that all the laws of the land apply to all adults without exception. The nation's constitution must provide methods, by which the people can, without recourse to violence, control the government which emerges in accordance with it and even specify the means for its own amendment. In shorthand, the constitution itself must be based on the principles of the rule of law” Nyerere, 1998).

An open and responsive electoral process must be one that facilitates the electoral officials to effect and abide by official decisions. The political parties will thereby be able to accept unfavourable outcomes as fundamentally legitimate and mounting their responses through the political process. It also means that the electorate and the general public trust others to do likewise, for there is little reason to play by the rules if one's critics and opponents are unlikely to do so too.

The overall emphasis must be to ensure that the institutions charged with the responsibility of managing the electoral process must be seen to be fair and functioning for the interests of the general public. An independent electoral commission will be a big step towards achieving this objective. An independent Electoral Commission must also ensure that the different political parties have the same opportunities to compete in elections under the multi-party political system. This will minimise possibilities of corrupting the electorate by those who have influence or power.

The struggle towards democratic elections must be part and parcel of the struggle to pull Tanzania out of poverty and towards sustainable development. Nyerere's views and beliefs on democratic elections point to the road ahead for Tanzania and other African countries.

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