What if Democracy Itself were the Problem?

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No development policy recommendation is worth the paper it is written on if it does not end with an acknowledgement of the role of democracy in making development happen. This is part of a general belief in the correlation between democracy and development. The belief is held by the most unlikely alliance of individuals: academics, civil society activists, international development bureaucrats, philanthropists, academic Marxists, neo-liberal denizens of the world of economics and a gullible global public sphere which invests a lot of emotional energy in the idea that development is a matter of finding the right kinds of algorithms (Macamo 2013).

So it is that conventional wisdom over the past quarter of a century since the end of the Cold War, especially within

the development policy world, has come to cherish the idea that one of the main reasons why the African continent lags behind has to do with the failure of democracy. When the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, the continent got off to a good start with national conferences almost all over the place. It went down the path of democratisation only to spoil everything along the way with the old habits of "African" politics: presidents for life, lack of accountability, liberation movements in power syndrome and, of course, neo-patrimonial politics to name but a few.

While it is true that more and more countries in Africa have embraced democracy and the level of intolerance towards autocracies is very low, we still need to ask, as social scientists, a vitally important question: 'Is democracy the solution to Africa's problems?' The question may seem at first trivial. After all, most of the evidence seems to suggest that most successful economies practise one or another form of liberal democracy. Exceptions here are, of course, Asian autocracies run by benevolent and development-oriented dictators, China in our days, oil-rich oligarchies in the Middle East and, last but not least, Western European countries themselves before they became economically successful and politically stable. It is not uncommon for economists like Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson (2013) to use Botswana's economic success and apparent political stability to describe what the continent is lacking.

The social sciences in Africa stand at an analytical crossroads. One road invites us to explore the standard account upon which the narrative of development as it is made relevant to Africa is based. According to this account, democracy was not only prior to development, but also a sine qua non condition for it. History, however, tells us a different story, unless, of course, only the time after World War II counts. It is easy to forget that up until just before the First World War only three countries in Europe were republics: France, Switzerland and Portugal, the latter only from 1911 onwards (see Hoppe 2001:ix). Democracy in the modern sense of the term, i.e. as universal suffrage and citizenship rights and legal protection of social rights is, historically, a very recent phenomenon (Chang 2007). The main problem with this account is that it extols the virtues of an accomplishment, i.e., successful democracy. It does not do the more relevant thing, i.e., look into the process which led to the outcome. If one looks at democracy as process, and not as outcome, one is likely to be less impatient towards Africa, for what the continent experiences as it strives to consolidate democracy is exactly what Europe on its way to democracy also experienced. Seen this way, it makes very little sense to blame Africans for failing to be democratic, for the experience of those who are now successfully democratic tells us that they went through similar difficulties. There is nothing intrinsically 'African' about the failure of democracy, just as, by the same token, there is nothing intrinsically 'Greek' about the success of democracy in Europe.

The other road from the crossroads would take us down a journey that ironically asks whether the terms of the equation have been adequately stated. Perhaps it is not democracy that leads to development, but rather development which eases the way for democracy. There is nothing new in this insight. The experience of countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Indonesia, not to say much about Western Europe itself, seems to suggest that there is a stronger correlation between economic growth and subsequent demands for democracy. In fact, Charles Tilly (2004) has convincingly shown that democracy in Europe was a contingent outcome of protest and contention which did not necessarily aim at democracy. The difficulties experienced by African countries in securing the approval of colonial powers for their demands for independence underline this point. The arguments used to delay independence to Africans were basically the same as those which were deployed by European political elites to delay universal suffrage, including female suffrage. As a matter of fact, representative democracy was a compromise solution that sought to accommodate popular demands for more participation and the elites' fear that the people might not be mature enough to govern themselves (Hoppe 2001).

To be sure, democracy has an intrinsic value and that alone gives us enough reasons to strive for it. What is at issue in this discussion, however, is whether democracy has the instrumental value which it is ascribed in its relationship to African development. My claim is that the pride of place given to the instrumental value of democracy has undermined social scientists' ability to account for social, political and economic phenomena in Africa. There are two main reasons for this. First, by stressing this instrumental value, researchers have tended to look at democracy as an explanation, rather than as something which needs to be explained. It is easy to claim that countries do not develop because they are not democratic enough, but what that exactly means is a mystery because clearly failure to democratise is what needs to be accounted for. Most attempts at explaining the failure of democracy are tautological in the sense of merely describing the problem. A country or people does not become democratic simply by virtue of wishing to be democratic. It is not automatic and, for this reason, it is analytically unhelpful to say democracy failed because politicians conduct fraudulent elections, do not accept good governance and violate human rights.

Secondly, the instrumental value of democracy blunts interest in the political and social processes unleashed by democratisation and how they may, in turn, undermine democracy itself. Freedom of expression, to take just one example, enhances the potential of public scrutiny. This may be good for governance and accountability. But what freedom of expression does first and foremost is not to enable society to reap its benefits. It poses a problem to be tackled. This right must be protected, also against the reaction of those who may feel to be above it.[1] This right might be misused to insult, slander or simply gain political advantage. The problem here is to think that democracy is only democracy when it is successful. Such an understanding of the notion makes it analytically useless.

Democracy can only be useful as a concept if it not only describes what is positive about it, but also everything else that becomes possible when democracy becomes the only game in town. The analytically interesting problem in this connection is that some, if not most, of the problems confronting African states are the result of the presence of democracy. Our understanding of this notion, therefore, must be sensitive to both sides of the coin.

The sense in which democracy might be the problem in Africa is, therefore, an analytical one. The African(ist) social scientific community needs to free itself from the normative content of concepts brought to Africa on the back of what Mahmood Mamdani once described as 'history by analogy' (Mamdani 1996). The crucial question we need to work on is neither whether Africa needs democracy to develop, nor which kind of democracy. Rather, we need to accept that democracy's positive attributes in themselves are not sufficient to ensure its success. For this reason, the crucial question must concern the conditions under which democracy yields development gains or fails to do so. These conditions are the pieces of the puzzle still missing in social scientific accounts of political processes in our continent to enable us to begin to develop a truly vernacular conceptual vocabulary that can help us gain a better understanding of our own reality. The assumption that democracy has an instrumental value forces us to take for granted an idealised account of Europe's own development. Positing the possibility that democracy might be the problem frees us from that idealised account. Moreover, it holds out the promise of a more fruitful engagement with Africa's problems.

Note

1. There is nothing specifically 'African' about intolerance towards such freedoms. Richard Nixon's impeachment in the USA should serve as useful reminder if any were required in times when 'fake news' and 'alternative facts' have entered our political vocabulary.

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