

The Challenges of Implanting and Building Multi-Party Democracy in Multi-Ethnic Societies in Africa

By

Tesfaye Habisso 02/12/10

INTRODUCTION: An Overview

Democracy as a social ideal has existed in the minds of men since the Golden Age of Greece, but democracy as a *modus operandi* of government is a later product of the Industrial Revolution. Democracy derives from the Greek "demos", the people, and "kratos," the exercise of power. In its most basic sense it is as Abraham Lincoln said, "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people." However, modern democracy is a very complex instrument, evolved out of a long process of social changes caused by technological developments. Democracy is a system of government which embodies, in a variety of institutions and mechanisms the ideal of political power based on the will of the people.

Thus it may safely be posited that democracies are political systems characterized by popular participation, genuine competition for executive office, and institutional checks on power. To paraphrase Winston Churchill, a democracy is a preferable form of government to the many alternative forms of government that have been present throughout history. According to the Nobel Prize-winning economist Sir Arthur Lewis, "the primary meaning of democracy is that all who are affected by a decision should have the chance to participate in making that decision, either directly or through chosen representatives" [W. Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa*, London: George Allen and Urwin, 1995, p.64-65]. Thus, the basic premise and assumption of democracy is the ability of the populace to participate effectively in the determination of their lives for themselves directly or through their elected representatives. A democracy, than any other system, allows for the voice of the people to be heard.. A democracy has never gone to war against another democracy. Democracies do not abuse human rights, and they generally allow for basic freedoms such as that of speech and other fundamental rights. They are also generally more stable and have fewer crises than other forms of government.

A strong democratic society will be marked by respect for human rights, particularly the "democratic rights" of freedom of opinion, expression and association, the right to take

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

part in the conduct of public affairs, and to vote and be elected at genuine and periodic elections held by secret ballot. It will be characterized by a strong and vibrant civil society, and an active, independent media, an independent judiciary, and a high level of public understanding of and participation in the political process.

The attributes of a democratic society include a freely elected parliament, not all of the same party, a tolerant respect for the opposition and for rules of the game under constitutional laws, an independent judiciary, a public service free from bias, an unrestricted press, no arbitrary imprisonment, no torture, no restraints on public meetings or dissemination of news, and the rule of law.

Joseph Schumpeter argues: "The democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people's vote" [Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991, p.6]. Following in the Schumpeterian tradition, Samuel P. Huntington defines a twentieth century political system as democratic to the extent that its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote. So defined, democracy involves the two dimensions--contestation and participation--that Robert Dahl saw as critical to his realistic democracy or polyarchy. It also implies the existence of those civil and political freedoms to speak, publish, assemble, and organize that are necessary to political debate and the conduct of electoral campaigns. "[Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last man*, The Free Press, New York, 1992, p.43].

Similarly, Huntington argues, "a system is undemocratic to the extent that the opposition is curbed or harassed in what it can do, or that opposition newspapers are censored or closed down, or that votes are manipulated or miscounted---In any society, the sustained failure of the major opposition political party to win office necessarily raises questions

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

concerning the degree of competition permitted by the system [Francis Fukuyama, *Ibid*, p.6].

A group of scholars who based their definition of democracy on a number of benchmark studies of democratization processes in various regions of the world, as well as on the findings of a number of other authors define democracy as a system of government which meets three essential conditions: "---meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organized groups (especially political parties) for all effective positions of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force; a highly inclusive level of political participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections, such that no major (adult) social group is excluded; and a level of civilian and political liberties--freedom of expression, freedom of the press, freedom to form and join organizations, [freedom of assembly]--sufficient to ensure the integrity of political competitions and participation". [Larry Diamond, Juan Linz & Seymour Martin Lipset (Eds), *Democracy in Developing Countries*, vol. 2, 1988, Africa, Boulder, London, p. XVI]

For many scholars, democracy is a delicate flower that requires a host of social and institutional prerequisites. One scholar suggests that democracy requires a populace endowed with nine psychological traits, among which are tolerance, realism, flexibility, and objectivity, and further, that the country must have economic well-being, economic equality, and an educated citizenry [Carl Cohen, *Democracy*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971]. Another political scientist names seven conditions necessary for democracy, including a "strong concern for the mass of people" and "high social mobility". [Alfred De Grazia, *The Elements of Political Science*, New York : Alfred Knopf, 1952, pp.. 546-547]. Robert Dahl described three essential conditions for a multiparty democracy to function; these are:(a) extensive competition by contestants including individuals, groups or parties for government; (b) political participation that provides the choice for the electorate to select candidates in free and fair elections; and (c) civil and political liberties that enable citizens to express themselves without fear of punishment [Robert Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p.221]. Two other scholars claim that democracy rests on seven basic beliefs, including "respect for individual personality," "belief in rationality," and equality of opportunity." [J.A.. Corry and Henry Abraham, *Elements of Democratic Government*, New York : Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 29,33,35]. Further, political theories suggest that it is especially difficult to sustain a

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

democracy in a society where political parties, interest groups, media of communication, schools and voluntary associations are determined along "religious, ideological, linguistic, regional, cultural, racial or ethnic" lines. [Alan M. Wachman, Taiwan : National Identity and Democratization, Armonk , New York : M..E. Sharpe, 1994, p.31]. In a similar vein, but a little more precisely, Smooha has argued that for non-democratic states in societies that are deeply divided along ethnic lines, "the transition from a non-democracy [to a democracy] is too big a jump." As a result, these states, he argues, might opt for the model he termed "ethnic democracy" [Sammy Smooha, " The Model of Ethnic Democracy: Characterization, Cases and Comparisons," a paper delivered at the Multiculturalism and Democracy in Divided Societies conference, Haifa University , 1998, p.43]. In his evaluation of the "third wave of democratization" of the seventies and eighties, the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington concludes that states become particularly susceptible to democratization when they have reached a certain minimal level of social and economic development. [Samuel P. Huntington, The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century, Norman , 1991, p.59ff]. If these democratic (pre) conditions have not been fulfilled, he argues, the onus lies on the local ruling classes to behave in a very responsible way and in a manner supportive of the democratization process [in their respective countries].

Democratic movement in the first place, was born out of a unique set of conditions prevalent in the Western world, where it swept away the solidity of centuries-old feudal rule and replaced it with the uncertainty and weakness of popular governments. Some of the ingredients necessary for the evolutionary birth of a democratic order are believed to be: (a) industrialization; (b) rise in literacy levels; (c) abundance of resources; (d) isolation from outside influences and, (e) political theoreticians whose vision spans the past, present and future and who have a grasp of the physical disciplines required in that particular age [http://www.hujra.com/democracy_not_work.hym].

On Democratic Transition and Consolidation

Most often, democracy has unfortunately come to be equated with mere superficial and easily recognizable mechanical processes, the most recognized of which being regular elections. Elections indeed are a necessary but by no means a sufficient condition for the completion of a democratic transition. The mere casting of a vote does not make a democracy even when the elections are indeed free and fair. It is believed that a country has completed the transition to democracy when " the government resulting from

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

election--- [has] the *de jure* as well as the *de facto* power to determine policy in many significant areas." [Linz and Stepan, " Toward Consolidated Democracies," pp.14-33]. Whatever the reason behind the transition, it is a long and difficult process that may take years to complete. But even if a country has transitioned to a democratic system, the journey towards democracy is not complete.

Then, at what moment does a successfully democratizing state become a mature democracy? When can its democracy be termed consolidated? Some scholars use the "two turnover rule" to define democratic consolidation: that is, a democracy is considered consolidated when power has changed hands twice as a result of free and fair elections. Others say that democracy is considered consolidated when it is "the only game in town": that is, when no significant political party or group seeks to come to power by means other than winning a free and fair election. Others measure the degree to which the country has achieved the institutional and legal characteristics of a mature democracy, using indicators such as competitive politics, regular elections, broad participation, constraints on arbitrary use of executive power, free speech, and respect for civil liberties, including minority rights.

As mentioned here above, once a country has completed a democratic transition, it is left for that democracy to be consolidated, a necessary condition for a lasting democratic regime. According to Linz and Stepan, a "consolidated" democracy is a "political regime in which democracy as a complex system of institutions, rules, and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase, 'the only game in town'". Haggard and Kaufman state, " a democratic consolidation is a process through which acceptance of a given set of constitutional rules becomes less directly contingent on immediate rewards and sanctions and increasingly widespread and routinized." Consolidation is essentially a more important process than transition. A government may be able to transition to democracy, but if it does not consolidate said democracy, it may relapse into authoritarianism or other non-democratic forms of government.

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

Additional factors must be in place if a democracy is to be considered "consolidated." First, the conditions must exist for the development of a free and lively civil society, a home-grown civil society that is free from external manipulation and internal state control. Second, there must be a relatively autonomous political society. Third, throughout the territory of the state all major political actors, especially the government and the state apparatus, must be effectively subjected to a rule of law that protects individual freedoms and associational life. Fourth, there must be an ethical state bureaucracy that is efficient and effective in service delivery and usable by the new democratic government. Fifth, there must be an institutionalized and vibrant economic society [Haggard and Kaufman, *The Political Economy of Democratic Transitions*, Princeton, NJ : Princeton University Press, 1995, p.15]..

Though we most often subscribe to glowing statements about the virtues of democracy, the process of becoming a democracy is fraught with more dangers than is usually acknowledged. While the world would undoubtedly be more peaceful if all states became more mature democracies, the problem of getting from here to there is easier said than done. In poor and divided multiethnic societies, a peaceful transition to democracy is exceptional, and the certainty that democracy will prevail is in question. Transitions to democracy in multi-ethnic and divided poor societies are mostly rocky and violent, and this often gives rise to warlike nationalism and violent ethnic conflicts.

Since the French Revolution (1789), the earliest phases of democratization have triggered some of the world's bloodiest nationalist struggles. Naively pressuring poor and ethnically divided authoritarian states to hold instant elections and to democratize rapidly can lead to disastrous results. As the historical records show, democracy can be quite destructive in many poor and divided societies. In Sri Lanka in the 1950s, as in Yugoslavia and the Caucasus in the 1980s, political elites pandered to ethnic nationalism of the dominant group to bolster their electoral prospects. Eventually the antagonisms they had

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

evoked between the majority and the minority became uncontrollable and their countries collapsed in ethnic violence and civil war. In these cases democracy was not a panacea but a disaster. This is why the democracy we see around the world today often has a distinctly ugly face. On the eve of the 1996 elections in Bosnia, the architect of the Dayton peace accords, American diplomat Richard Holbrooke, fretted: "Suppose the election was declared free and fair and those elected are racists, fascists, separatists, who are publicly opposed to peace and reintegration. That is the dilemma." Indeed it is, not only in the former Yugoslavia, Algeria, Palestine and Rwanda but increasingly around the world.

Whatever the case, without a genuine embrace of democracy and democratic values by the wider sections of a country's population especially the political elites, and without a high level of literacy, socio-economic development and visionary political leadership, the possibility of realizing a well-functioning, stable and sustainable democracy in nations where it has not existed before is utterly difficult. In such nations, past experience of authoritarian rule may have led citizens to expect very little from their political leaders. Before the transition from authoritarian rule, successful politicians had to develop a reputation for using their power to serve their superiors and to reward their supporters in the political hierarchy. So the absence of previous democracy may generally imply that there are no politicians who have established reputations for responsibly using political power to serve the population at large. In such a situation, voters may naturally believe that the winners of the first election for control of the national government will use their powers mainly to benefit themselves and their active supporters. Worse, they may also naturally believe that any other politicians would behave the same way if they could take the place of the incumbent leaders. With such low expectations, voters are unlikely to support democratic challengers to the ruling party, and they might see little reason to protest if the government suppressed its political opposition.

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

Even worse still, in most African countries today, "democratically elected regimes are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms. Everywhere we go, we can see the rise of pseudo-democracies--plenty of elections (most often rigged), but few individual as well as collective rights. Democracy after all, is not just about free and fair elections, but also the sanctity of basic [civil and political] liberties, like free speech and assembly, private property and contracts, and the rule of law." [Fareed Zakaria, "Doubts About Democracy," Newsweek Dec. 29,1997 to Jan.5, 1998, p.26]. Not only suborning constitutional limits on power but using all state resources and their organizational skills as well as their incumbency advantages to wantonly rig elections and to perpetuate their misrule, by hook or by crook, that is, by any means, fair or foul, possible! Alas, this is, with a few exceptions such as Botswana , Mauritius , Ghana , Mali , Senegal , and perhaps South Africa , the sorry state of democracy in much of today's Africa .

The Challenge of Developing and Implementing Electoral Democracy in Africa

The issue of developing and implementing sustainable systems of electoral democracy in Africa is often discussed out of historical context. This discussion can only be enlightening, and helpful in indicating what needs to be done, if it is comparative, that is, if it looks at the emergence and development of electoral democracy in the context of world history. Electoral democracy in Africa has been decisively shaped by Africa's relationship with the West; and leaders of developed, Western nations claim that Africa's record in practicing and developing democracy shapes how they view Africa, and now determines the type of policies the West shall have with Africa . So, we must talk about both the West and Africa .

The biggest challenge before us is to adjust to the reversal, in Africa and other Third World countries, of the sequence of technological developments and industrialization, socio-economic development, multi-party politics and electoral democracy, which occurred in developed Western countries. There was a sequence in the West. The successful implementation of electoral democracy in developed Western societies was, as it were, the cherry-on-top, after the triumph of industrialization, abundance of resources and high levels of economic development, the rise in literacy levels and the spread of

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

literacy, education, and reading material, visionary political theoreticians/leadership and the successful rise of welfare states.

Western social science literature of the 1950s by and large shared a common view on this issue. They viewed the emergence of democracy in their societies in historical context. The leading political sociologist of the time, Professor Seymour Martin Lipset, summarized this viewpoint as follows:

Perhaps the most common generalization linking political systems with other aspects of society has been that democracy is related to the state of economic development. The more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy. From Aristotle down to the present, men have argued that only in a wealthy society in which relatively few citizens lived at the level of real poverty could there be a situation in which the mass of the population intelligently participate in politics and develop the self-interest necessary to avoid succumbing to the appeals of irresponsible demagogues. A society divided between a large impoverished mass and a small favored elite results either in oligarchy (dictatorial rule of a small upper stratum) or in tyranny (popular-based dictatorship). [Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man*, New York, Anchor Books, 1963, p.31]

In this important essay in Western scholarship, Professor Lipset argues that economic growth creates the necessary preconditions for democracy by expanding literacy, creating a secure middle class, and nurturing cosmopolitan attitudes; that successful industrialization and socio-economic development tend to lessen sharp and virulent conflicts of social classes; and that the same technological developments, industrialization and socio-economic development tend to spread education, and raise the level of education, information, knowledge and commitment, among society members--all of which are favorable grounds for the triumph and sustenance of modern electoral democracy and its requisite value system.

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

I must stress, here, the crucial role of the rise of the welfare state in laying the foundation for legitimizing the new social order in the minds and hearts of the lower classes in developed societies. I emphasize that these are conclusions arrived at by Western scholars in the study of democracy in their own societies!

The spread of democratic rights to the masses of working classes and other lower status groups in Western society was a result of bitter, and bloody, conflicts waged by the working classes and other oppressed communities.. These bitter and bloody conflicts lasted for decades, indeed, a whole century, between 1830 to 1930, the period during which the foundations of industrialization and modernization were being laid in Western and Central Europe .

Universal suffrage, as a democratic right of all society members of age, was only granted in stages, and very reluctantly by the ruling classes. All methods were resorted to, in the attempt to delay real democratization. Here are the words of the noted English historian, Eric Hobsbawm:

These developments were viewed without enthusiasm by the governments that introduced them ---Manipulation in the crudest sense was still easy. One might, for instance, place strict limits on the political role of assemblies elected by universal franchise--- And there was always the possibility of simple sabotage, by complicating the process of getting on to electoral registers. Thus in Britain it has been estimated that in 1914 about half the working class was de facto disenfranchised by such devices.

[Eric Hobsbawm, The Age of Empire: 1875-1914, 1987, pp. 86-87]

A remarkable story in the history of universal suffrage is the struggle which was waged by women to be allowed to vote. In almost all developed Western countries, the right of

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

women to vote was only achieved in the 20th century. In Switzerland , women only achieved the right to vote, after mid-20th century!

Another remarkable story in the history of universal suffrage is the struggle of African-Americans, in the USA , to get the right to vote. It was only in 1964, with the Civil Rights Act, signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, that universal franchise was affirmed for all African-Americans.

The important point to stress is that electoral democracy in the West was not born on the same day as the nation-states of these societies. It took a long, conflict-ridden period of a century to establish modern constitutional democracy on a secure basis.

What is unique and challenging, in the case of Africa and other Third World countries, is that the birth of nation-states, rather multi-nation states, in these countries is expected to coincide with the successful birth and maturation of electoral democracy.

In developed Western societies, the relationship, over time, between constitutional democracy and socio-economic development was a positive one, i.e., the achievement of high levels of socio-economic development became a great facilitator of the successful establishment of electoral democracy.

In Africa, the relationship between the establishment of electoral democracy and socio-economic development has been, and continues to be, a negative one; i.e., most African countries are not only at a very low level of socio-economic development, but the socio-economic well-being of the average member of society is actually deteriorating.

Africa is the most undeveloped and the poorest continent in the world by all standard social and economic indicators one chooses to use: **Half the population lives below the poverty line, that is, on less than \$1 a day. Sub-Saharan Africa , where more than half (51%) of the population live in absolute poverty, is now home to almost 291 million poor people. More than half the population has no access to safe drinking water. More than 2 million infants die annually before reaching their first birth-day. The mortality**

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

rate of children under five is 140 per 1000, and life expectancy at birth is only 54 years. The rate of illiteracy for people over 15 is 41%. There are only 18 mainline telephones per 1000 people in Africa, compared with 146 for the world as a whole and 567 for high-income countries. In 1998, Sub-Saharan Africa's debt stock was estimated at \$236 billion and that of the entire continent was over \$300 billion. Africa's debt burden is twice that of any other region in the world--it carries 11% of the developing world's debt, with only 5% of its income. GNP per capita in Sub-Saharan Africa is \$ 308 while external debt per capita stands at \$365 [*Time for a NEPAD Reality Check, The Star, Tuesday, September 9,2003, p.13*]. A recent leading article in the New York Times Magazine states as follows:

Each year most nations in the region grow poorer, hungrier and sicker. Their share of global trade and investment has been collapsing. Average per capital income is lower now than in the 1960s, with half the population surviving on less than US 65 cents a day---During the past decade or so, the poorest of Africa's poor have suffered as rarely before---hunger has become a chronic problem throughout the region, often occurring even under the best of weather conditions. The World Food Program warns that nearly 40 million Africans are struggling against starvation, a "scale of suffering" that is "unprecedented." Coincident with the hunger is HIV/AIDS, which has beset Sub-Saharan Africa in a disproportionate way, cursing it with 29.4 million infections, nearly three-quarters of the world's caseload. [*New York Times Magazine, 13 July 2003, p.3*]

How can/does Africa successfully establish and sustain electoral democracy amidst such a catastrophe? European civilization could not have succeeded to do so under such distressing circumstances. The collapse of capitalist economies in developed Western societies, following World War I, led to Fascism, i.e., to the collapse of electoral democracy in key areas of Europe. Professor H.R. Trevor-Roper explained European Fascism thus:

As long as 'liberal' economics had worked, as long as laissez-faire had led to economic expansion, with adequate benefits for the working classes, the middle classes had felt safe. But once the economy began to contract, and liberal economics left the proletariat no cushion between unemployment and starvation, no remedy except the revolution to which they were now summoned by Russia, the nemesis foreseen by the nineteenth-century conservatives seemed to have arrived. So each stage in the rise of

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

European fascism can be related to a moment of middle-class panic caused either by economic crisis or by its consequence, the threat of socialist revolution. [H.R.Trevor-Roper, "The Phenomenon of Fascism", in *European Fascism*, edited by S.J. Wolf, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968, p.24; also see Hans J. Morgenthau, *The Decline of Democratic Politics*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1962, p.247-256]

The scholars and elites of developed Western societies were very clear and united in the view that successful economic and social development, together with the welfare state, is a great facilitator for the successful emergence of electoral democracy. In the main, they never regarded the political sphere of their societies as a 'stand-alone' issue, which could be discussed outside the context of economics, as we often discuss the issue of democratization and the practice of democracy in Africa .

As apparent in the remarks of Professor Trevor-Roper on European fascism, these scholars and elites were clear about the fact that the collapse of the capitalist economy, creating enormous insecurity in the daily lives of ordinary society members, especially in the lives of the working classes and the middle classes, would threaten to bring about the collapse of electoral democracy.

Up to this very day, the elites of Western society have an enormous fear of mass unemployment, for they see mass unemployment as a serious threat to the continued sustenance of the prevailing social and political order. Roosevelt's New Deal policies, in the 1930s, in the USA, were hastily formulated and put in place as a way of saving American society from a revolution of the 1917 Russian type, and from general destabilization of the economic and social system then prevailing in America.

How then do we expect the serious socio-economic collapse, lack of technological developments and the "ingredients necessary for the evolutionary development of a democratic order" and, of course, mass unemployment, prevailing in contemporary Africa,

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

which lack welfare state provisions--how do we expect African societies in such a desperate situation, to develop and sustain electoral democracy? How do we expect the elites of Africa to do that which the elites of developed Western countries felt they could not do in their own societies under conditions of socio-economic collapse and mass unemployment? The deep, unprecedented socio-economic crisis existing in most African countries, a crisis which began to show its terrible features in the 1980s and 1990s, and continues to this day, is actually the root cause of the crisis of governance and accountability in the political regimes of Africa.

Further, **"if large rural majorities in Africa are too poor to participate, too dispersed to organize, too remote from information to know alternatives, a multi-party democratic system with universal suffrage does not give them democratic influence. Not least the experience of fascist masses applauding irrational, violent and destructive policies brought philosophers to understand that democracy cannot work without a high level of information, knowledge and commitment to a wider public. Democracy requires considerable depth of opinion, a high level of political consciousness and responsibility in the population at large. Without it, no regular vote and no number of parties can guarantee democracy"**. [Siegfried Pausewang, "Peasant Self-determination and the State: On Rural Conditions of Democracy in Ethiopia ," Proceedings of the Eleventh International Conference of Ethiopian Studies, Vol. II, AAU, 1994]

I make a distinction between what I call fermentation going on deep below, in the layers of the economy, on the one hand, and the bubbles at the top, issuing from the fermentation, on the other hand; that is, the bubbles which show themselves as social, cultural and political crises and movements in the day-to-day life of society. The tragedy, and frequent mistake we make, is that we focus all, or most, of our attention upon the bubbles at the top, and pay hardly any attention to the fermentation below, from which the bubbles issue. We lose the vision of the total picture, and consequently dwell at shallow levels, in our discussions, concentrating mostly on personalities.

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

Let me hasten to correct a possible misunderstanding of my argument by some people. Yes, there was a historical sequence of developments in the West, which led to the successful emergence of electoral democracy. Yes, the period of time from the start of industrialization, to the 'cherry-on-top,' to the successful emergence of electoral democracy was more than an entire century.

Do not misunderstand me to be arguing for a similarly long historical period for the incubation and consolidation of modern democracy in Africa . Africans are not asking for a postponement of the agenda for democratization in Africa ; we are not arguing for the postponement of the 'cherry-on-top' to a period of a century from now, to match the historical sequence in the West. No, the masses of Africans want democracy now. For the masses of Africans, "democracy is not a luxury that can await the arrival of prosperity," as the Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen rightfully argues. Furthermore, contrary to the highly influential argument by many scholars that poor countries must develop economically before they can democratize, historical data have convincingly proved otherwise. Poor democracies have grown at least as fast as poor autocracies and have significantly outperformed the latter on most indicators of social well-being. They have also done much better at avoiding catastrophes. Dispelling the "development-first, democracy later" argument is critical not only because it is wrong but also because it has led to atrocious policies--indeed, policies that have undermined international efforts to improve the lives of hundreds of millions of people in the developing world. Those who believe that democracy can take hold only once a state has developed economically preach a go-slow approach to promoting democracy. But many who believe that countries often remain poor precisely because they retain autocratic political structures believe that a development-first strategy perpetuates a deadly cycle of poverty, conflict and oppression. [Joseph T. Siegle, Michael M. Weinstein, and Morton H. Halpern, " Why Democracies Excel," The New York Times, Sept/Oct. 2004 issue of Foreign Affairs, p.1]

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

All I am saying is that the discussion of the emergence and practice of electoral democracy in Africa must factor in the discussion the 1) failure of industrialization in Africa, up to our time, 2) the failure of African elites to focus upon initiating the African Agricultural Revolution, 3) the failure of development in Africa, up to our time, the starting point of which should be initiating Rural Development and the elimination of underdevelopment in rural Africa, 4) the failure of the African elite, so far, to remold and redesign education in Africa, so as to factor in African traditions, cultures and languages, and to spread literacy and reading material to the masses of African people, 5) the failure of African elites, so far, to formulate Africa-centered solutions to the severe crisis and collapse of the African economy, and to the crisis of mass unemployment and illiteracy, 6) the failure of African elites to show a genuine commitment to democracy and to embrace its universal values as well as its rules, procedures and ethics.

I repeat: We Africans are not arguing for the postponement of the agenda of the implementation of modern constitutional, multiparty electoral democracy. We want democratic rights and universal suffrage now, we want the respect of human and group rights now, we want the respect of civil and political liberties now, not in stages, not over a period of a century, as happened in the developed West. But the challenges surrounding the successful emergence and implementation of multiparty electoral democracy in contemporary Africa are much more daunting and forbidding than the challenges that surrounded the successful emergence and implementation of electoral democracy and pluralistic politics in Western societies.

African elites are, and must be, willing to meet this daunting, and forbidding challenge, instead of trying to perpetuate one party rule in the name of democracy. Africans must use their ingenuity and creativity to devise, formulate, and design new, creative ways of implementing genuine multiparty electoral democracy amidst the historically determined disadvantages existing in our societies. For example, we must find ingenious, creative ways of implementing electoral democracy in the African countryside, where the majority

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

of Africans live, lacking mass literacy and modern reading material, living in heavily underdeveloped pastoral and other rural areas without modern means of communications, without modern roads, without modern clinics, and often without sufficient food and basic necessities.

I assert, for instance, that it is extremely difficult to have a reasonably accurate Voters Roll in a society which is overwhelmingly rural, non-industrial, poor, and overwhelmingly underdeveloped. It can be done, but it requires the commitment of enormous resources and use of great ingenuity, a commitment that is not apparent in many African countries, so far.

When we talk about good governance and accountability, we must have in mind the genuine and effective inclusion of the masses of rural Africans in the issue and practice of governance and accountability. This is an unprecedented challenge in the emergence and implementation of modern democracy, which was never faced by any of the developed Western societies at this comparable stage of historical development.

As Africans, we do not want to shy away from this challenge; we must seriously focus on ways of meeting this challenge in our own creative ways, taking into consideration the unique conditions prevailing in African societies, and also factoring in African traditions and cultures. Traditionally, African societies have democratic roots where elders have met to discuss and reach consensus on issues of concern to their villages. Although these systems with non-elected leaders--men only--would not be called democratic today, certain aspects can still be of value. The tradition of finding ways of dialogue to form consensus, inclusion of all the populace of an area in the discussions, respect for elders and knowledge, respect for elders and knowledge, extended family system of helping one another in need, community rights over atomistic individualism, etc. could be useful even today.

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

Whatever the case, African countries need to adopt these values and traditions in their democracies and to move away from democratic models that have been imported from outside and models of government that are introduced and imposed upon them by the post-colonial political elites. We must implement an all-inclusive participatory multiparty democracy now, and end the era of fake elections and pseudo-democracies in Africa . African rural and urban communities must be able to effectively participate in the determination of their own destiny and all matters relating thereto, instead of leaving the political arena to power hungry elites alternating in parliament every four or five years to repress and crush the people, to loot the treasury bare and, to siphon off the wealth and stash it in dubious banks abroad.

Finally, we must fully understand that establishing electoral democracy in Africa is bound to take a long time and that elections alone will not produce democracy and do not necessarily bring about democratic culture or guarantee a democratic exercise of rule. Creating a democracy in poverty-ridden and illiterate multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies--societies that have not yet fully embraced democratic values and are not yet familiar with democratic concepts, rules and procedures--is bound to take a long time and to exact huge costs. The most critical factor in this regard is a restraint in the use of violence in domestic political affairs, for democracy cannot thrive in a highly violent society. This must be our democracy's minimum requirement if we indeed have a deep and genuine commitment to develop real democracy in our countries. It is only when we are prepared for the inevitable long-haul that we will be able to realize real and functioning democracy in the end. Democracy is measured over time, it is not acquired overnight or in a short period of time. This indeed requires a great responsibility, patience and tolerance from all stakeholders in the democratization process if democracy is to take hold and blossom in Africa . The desire for democratic political reform now exists throughout most of Africa, but if judgment is needed on performance, one must ask not about intentions but whether a particular regime is less brutal today--less oppressive, more tolerant, more representative and more open--than its predecessors

EPRDF-Supporters Forum

were a year or a decade ago, and whether the movement for reform, where it exists, will continue and gather pace. After all, the success of democracy and democratic institutions has been organic and not mechanical. They work only if they can live and grow in the common acceptance and rooted affection of the community from which they take their form. However, as Dennis Austin succinctly put it: "No society becomes democratic without pain, no state achieves economic development without struggle."

[Dennis Austin, Liberal Democracy in Non-Western States, Professors World Peace Academy, 2700 University Avenue East, Minnesota, 1995, Page Xii] Above all, there is no magic wand to rapidly and easily turn countries to democratic and developed states. All societies have to struggle in a peaceful and persistent manner to achieve these objectives. This is one of the greatest challenges facing Africa today.

