

---

# DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN WEST AFRICA: HOW INTEGRAL IS THE RELATIONSHIP?

BY YAKUBU A. OCHEFU\*

---



**T**his paper examines the relationship between democracy and development. It starts by defining both concepts and their relationship. By situating both concepts in a historical context, and using human development as an index to gauge the relationship between the two, it suggests a simple panacea for understanding the links between them. Following this, it argues that contemporary West African politicians have jettisoned centuries of building blocks of relationships for more distal forms of associations which seem ineffectual in the face of growing internationalisation of social, political and economic forces. The paper concludes by suggesting a number of variables that can be pursued to help meet the challenges of constructing democratic development at the national and regional levels.

## Democracy and Development: A Clarification of Concepts

Both concepts are popular as they are varied. Democracy, the older of the two concepts, has a very rich and varied definition. In recent times (Boutrou-Ghali, 2003), democracy has come to simply mean a political system whereby the whole of society can participate at every level in the decision-making process and keep control of it. At the kernel of democracy are a number of

basic building blocks. These are the promotion of human rights especially the rights to the means of life and fundamental freedoms; Respect for differences; Freedom of speech and thought; and the Rule of Law. Democracy as a political system is also anchored on a cultural platform. Democratic culture is a sum total of learned behaviour that guides the operations of democratic processes and its linkage with the wider society. Thus beyond the electoral, legislative and executive functionalities that preoccupy most studies of democracy, political culture encompasses the social, financial, governmental and non-governmental agents that relate to the critical mass in a democratic setting.

Until recently, development was conceptualised as an index for measuring the economic status of a society. Development as currently defined refers to the economic, social and cultural progress to which a people aspire. Thus it is now commonplace to talk about human development and its sustainability. Taken in this broad multidimensional context, human development seeks to advance the progress of humankind from an economic,

social, political, cultural and environmental standpoint.

From our definition of democracy and development, it is clear that both are inexorably linked. Development is primarily an economic concept and is operationalised at the level of society by political systems such as democracy. But is democracy a necessary precondition for development, or does democracy promote and sustain development? Put differently, must a country democratise in order to develop? Do political systems matter in the relationship between development and democracy? These questions when posed especially in the African context become more cogent given the rather poor performance of African nations in advancing the course of democracy and/or development.

A review of the rich body of literature on the relationship between the two shows three major tendencies. First was the view popular in the late 1950's that saw democracy as a luxury item which poor countries could not afford. Democracy becomes manifest only after a stage of development has been achieved. This perspective of the relationship between democracy and development was revisited following rapid and sustained economic growth development first experienced by the Soviet Union and, more recently, by a number of South East Asian countries under non-democratic rule. It became clear to many scholars that regime types under a number of mitigating circumstances could cause development to occur. In the

***These questions  
when posed especially  
in the African context  
become more cogent  
given the rather poor  
performance of  
African nations in  
advancing the course  
of democracy and/or  
development.***

same vein, persistent development challenges exists in old democracies like India, a number of countries in Africa South of the Sahara, and Latin America.

Gerray, Thacker and Affaro (2006) in a new study have argued that from a contemporaneous relationship, democracy and development will always remain contentious. However seen on a longer term, or as they put it: "show what difference history can make", they conclude that a country's historical experience with democracy has a stronger and more consistent influence on its current level of development. For them, democracy only advances human development when considered as a historical phenomenon. Their study also shows that of the 80 worst economic performers in the last forty years all but three have been autocracies. Democracies have performed better than autocracies in social welfare dimensions of development (life expectancy, child mortality, education etc). Their view lends credence to the path-breaking work

of Przeworski and Limongi (2000) who using extensive cross-national data tried to show empirically that rising economic wealth does not necessarily lead to democracy but, rather, wealth had a positive correlation on the success rate. Thus the wealthier a nation, the more likely its democracy will survive. Pei (1999), going further, has calculated that a nation with a per capital income of \$1,000 has a democratic life expectancy of eight years. For those with per capital income of between \$2,000 and \$3,000, it is 26 years while democratic immortality can only be achieved when a country's per capita income is above \$6,000.

What about countries that have seemingly scarified democracy at the expense of development? It first occurred in the Soviet Union under Stalinist rule and more recently in China and South East Asia. As Stiglitz (1999) and a number of commentators have opined, the trade-off for democracy and development occurred in a geopolitical environment that was steeped in deep ideological struggles. To abolish the advance of Russian and Chinese communism during the cold war, western governments supported many civil and military dictators in the third world. This support translated into billions of dollars of direct foreign investment that laid a solid foundation for capitalist expansion and socio-economic development. In Africa, countries like South Africa and Zaire attracted sufficient ideological attention because of their strategic mineral deposits and western powers

invested heavily ensuring that apartheid rule and a military dictatorship was condoned.

However, as the recent political history of many of these autocracies has shown development may occur under authoritarian rule, its consolidation usually takes place under democracy.

### **Building Blocks of Democracy and Development**

As was noted earlier, democracy as defined has a number of fundamental building blocks on which it rests. These are;

- **Political Equality.** Democracy, as defined, assumes at least theoretically, that all actors are equal. The right to vote and be voted for is a sort of political leveler that puts all adults on a similar pedestal. This virtue is very important as it anchors the other key components of democracy.
- **Free and fair political competition.** While elections do not equal democracy, the ability to choose representatives in a free and fair manner is at the very core of democratic enterprise.
- **Rule of Law.** At the institutional and individual level, the rule of law guarantees that all actors play by the rules with the constitution as the guiding post.
- **Public freedom.** Participation and political ownership, freedom of speech, association and assembly, the press, civil and

*However, as the recent political history of many of these autocracies has shown development may occur under authoritarian rule, its consolidation usually takes place under democracy.*

political tolerance of the opposition, participation in decision-making processes such as budgets, appointments, enactment of new laws through public hearings etc.

- **Responsiveness of Government.** This pertains to the way elected governments promote human rights; especially rights to the means of life (food, shelter, security, education and health).

These basic building blocks interface with other key variables that promote, strengthen and secure

democracy. These include education, scientific and technological development, health and human development. Other variables include peace and security and good governance.

Good governance basically refers to the capacity and commitment of the state to function and provide services to the people. It encompasses the role played by the elected political office holders, the appointed top level bureaucrats and their support staff, the supervising, accounting and auditing agents and more important, the civil society. The matrix shown below illustrates the tripartite relationship between democracy, good governance and development.

While these broad-building blocks are universal, their particular mix and stage of implementation and maturity varies from individual nations. Thus older and wealthier and more developed democracies will have a solid manifestation of these blocks while emerging democracies may struggle to attain one or two variables. An examination of the challenges of

**Table 1: Tripartite Relationship between Democracy, Good Governance and Development**

<b>Democracy</b>	<b>Good Governance</b>	<b>Development</b>
<b>Human Rights, Free and Fair Political Competition</b>	<b>Rule of Law</b>	<b>Favourable /Stable polity suitable for long term development/investments.</b>
<b>Participation</b>	<b>Transparency, Accountability and Conflict Resolution</b>	<b>Reduction of Corruption and the reduced cost of providing goods and services</b>
<b>Responsiveness</b>	<b>Capacity and Commitment</b>	<b>Effective and Efficient Bureaucracy</b>
<b>Equality</b>	<b>Rule of law and Social Capital</b>	<b>Emergence of a critical mass of people who will defend existing gains and fight for new ones</b>

constructing democratic development will illustrate this further.

### **Emerging Democracies and the Challenges of Constructing Democratic Development**

The debate on the link between democracy and development in Africa dates back to the immediate post Second World War and decolonisation period. As the colonial state was beginning to contemplate independence given the internal and external pressures against it, a number of scenarios began to be debated on the nature and character of the post colonial state in Africa in terms of development or modernisation. For the Africans themselves, two major options quickly emerged. Broadly speaking, these were paths to development designed and shaped by liberal democracy and capitalist orientation, or a path paved by socialism. What ultimately decided the path chosen was more often than not factored on the nature of the nationalist leadership and their ideological underpinnings, the extent of the political and economic grip by former colonial masters, the strategic/regional positioning of the country as appraised by the major super powers, and the internal geo-political dynamics of individual countries. Thus in West African the range of modernisation paths varied from Marxist-Leninist/communism, African socialism, neo-liberal capitalism and African welfarism.

In nearly fifty years, since the

### ***Religious fundamentalism, racism and ethnicity when applied to the political space leave very little room for rational processing of relationships***

first country in the sub-region became independent from colonial rule, only Senegal has maintained its civil rule. All other countries in the sub-region have had their experience with democratic rule interrupted by one form of authoritarian rule or the other. This simply means that most of the countries in the sub-region can best be described as emerging democracies. In such democracies, a number of variables that define the shape, nature and character of governance prevail. These include the age of the country, its resource endowment, the number and types of regimes that have ruled in the past; the type of transition that ushered in the current government; the state of the economy; and the vision and political will of the leadership. Emerging democracies in their early stages will be preoccupied with elections, constitutional and governance reforms and in countries where the transition came as a result of civil strife, rebuilding institutional and economic infrastructure.

To construct democratic development, emerging democracies in West Africa face a plethora of challenges. The first relates to the

rule of law and security. The rule of law reinforces security and provides every actor in the democratic enterprise a code of conduct and behaviour that ultimately ensures success or failure. The rule of law translates to the ability to fight crime and corruption, and provide legal and jurisdictional guarantees that will protect civil rights, property and investments, freedom of speech, thought and association. The rule of law provides security and protection for those who defend human rights or fight corruption. Indeed the rule of law is the major pillar on which democratic development rests.

A second major challenge is the existence of groups of extremely poor people who are completely excluded and/or alienated from participating in the political, social and cultural life of their communities. Such gross social and economic inequalities not only have a tendency to undermine social harmony and political stability they are also contrary to the spirit of democracy. A third challenge, which is closely related to the second, is the existence of religious fanaticism, racism and xenophobia. Religious fundamentalism, racism and ethnicity when applied to the political space leave very little room for rational processing of relationships. This often gives rise to irredentism or identitarian closures as experienced in states like Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal and Nigeria. A fourth challenge is the inequality between women and men. Globally women are increasingly being recognised as very powerful agents of development. However in many

countries, there is a lack of political will to ensure gender mainstreaming, along the lines of the Beijing Convention, that will enable women to contribute their quota to the fight against underdevelopment.

A fifth major challenge is excessive concentration of powers especially in the hands of the executive arms of government. In most emerging democracies, the executive arm of government is so powerful that more often than not, it violates constitutional provisions that seek to ensure proper separation of powers. It has been argued that in some countries like Nigeria, state power is so awesome that there is nothing a person who has access to it cannot do, and similarly, there is nothing those who do not have access to it cannot suffer. Six relates to what has been described as West African model of democratic transition. This simply means a situation whereby a military general or one party leader transits from authoritarian rule to democratic rule via "controlled" elections. Although this model was not invented in West Africa (nor Africa for that matter), it has been dubbed West African because of the preponderance of this type of transition in the sub-region. At the last count at least six West African nations had had this type of transition.

### **The West African Situation**

In 1992, *Time* magazine described the situation in Africa thus;

*Africa has a genius for*

*extremes, for the beginning and the end. It seems simultaneously connected to some memory of Eden and to some foretaste of apocalypse. Nowhere is day vivid or night darker. Nowhere are the forests more luxuriant. Nowhere is there a continent more miserable. ...Africa - sub Saharan Africa at least - has begun to look like an immense illustration of chaos theory. This was because much of the continent has turned into a battleground of contending dooms: AIDS and overpopulation, poverty, starvation, illiteracy, corruption, social breakdown, vanishing resources, overcrowded cities, drought, war, and the homelessness of war's refugees... African has become the basket case of the planet, the "Third World of the Third World", a vast continent in free fall.*

This was 1992. I need not bother you with the gory details of what has happened in the continent between 1992 and now. Has the picture gotten any better? Your guess is as good as mine. As we ponder on how Africa can halt its "free fall" or no longer provide the empirical evidence to support the chaos theory, it is important to first jettison escapist answers as to why all this is so. For example, after over forty years of independence, some still hold colonialism responsible for the problems in Africa. While it is true that colonialism described by

eminent historian Adu Boahen: as a one-armed bandit, created many of the structural distortions that are at the roots of many problems in the continent, and while it is also true that neo-colonial transgressions have not helped matters, the question we must now ask is: Why has it taken so long to provide solutions to the problems posed by these sad aspects of our historical experience? Why have the political leadership in West Africa, especially, done so poorly as to arrest the dreams of millions of their citizens of a life of peace, stability and sustained growth? Why have they found it difficult to build on centuries of building blocks of relationships that saw the sub-region produce empires and kingdoms such as ancient Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Kanem-Borno, Oyo, Asante, Benin and Sokoto? Why do they find it difficult to construct democratic development at the pan-regional level when long before Europeans came and gave us our modern boundaries, peoples of the sub-region were held together by religious, cultural, economic and political bonds? Why do the political and educated elites fan embers of distrust, suspicion and enmity, and highlight the few things that separate us like European languages, colonial boundaries and ethnic identities, rather than support, promote and build on those that unite us like shared histories, cultural and religious affinities and commercial contacts?. West African leaders cannot claim to be oblivious of the fact that trading Diasporas crisscrossed the entire sub-region long before the advent of colonialism and continue to do so

today. They also cannot deny the presence of Fanti and Ijo fisher folk who ply their specialised skills along the entire coastline of the sub-region. Neither can they deny presence of migrant farmers and Fulani cattle rearers from the sahel zone to the savanna taking advantage of environmental conditions to augment their incomes.

The eminent political scientist Larry Diamond (2005) has pointed out rather bluntly that Africa cannot develop without democracy, and democracy in Africa ultimately cannot be sustained without development. Indeed as Gyimah Boadi (2001) has argued, the multiethnic, multi-cultural and multi-class environment that is found in Africa can perhaps be best managed in a democratic setting where principles such as federalism and protected minorities, respect for human rights and decentralisation of power prevail.

There can be no denying that some progress has been made in the last ten years. As emerging democracies the sub-region to date has recorded only a few cases of political backsliding. Some like Ghana have achieved the magical third election that will confirm a measure of stability in democratic transitions. Others like Nigeria have to wait until 2007 to see if they can consolidate their democracy. To begin to work towards constructing democratic immortality, West African political leadership must begin to take seriously a number of key issues and challenges.

- ◆ The first is a substantial

***Some like Ghana have achieved the magical third election that will confirm a measure of stability in democratic transitions. Others like Nigeria have to wait until 2007 to see if they can consolidate their democracy.***

investment in civic infrastructure and education. The building of trust, confidence, reciprocity, citizenship and public accountability is a *sin qua non* for sustained growth and development of democracy.

- ◆ Second, the leadership must purge itself of all manner of political pathologies. For many of them, capture of state power is a matter of life and death. There is only one election and if that is lost, the entire process and indeed country can burn. If they win, because they do not have faith in the process (and for many in the country they run), they commoditise state power and use it for private purposes.
- ◆ Third is the commitment to good governance. Here it is important to note that good governance should not be seen as a modern concept imported from Europe and thus alien to Africans. African traditional political culture was not devoid of accountability,

transparency, rule of law, and broad-based participation in decision-making. Indeed all these were hallmarks of traditional political culture.

- ◆ Fourth is the respect of the will of the people. As was noted earlier the right to a vote makes democracy a great social leveler. The masses of any country demonstrate this right during elections. Their faith in a leader is made credible when they know that they can throw him or her out for failing to keep election promises. In the same vein, the political office holders must possess the political will to subordinate their personal interest and eschew undue politicisation.
- ◆ Fifth is the strengthening of national institutions. Either as formal or informal bodies, institutions as systems of property rights, moral conventions or norms, types of contracts and authority relations, form a spontaneous order that constraints human behaviour. It is through a number of institutions that the rule of law and the subordination of individual right find expression. The insulation of the bureaucracy backed by constitutional provisions will also ensure that agencies of vertical and horizontal accountability are effective.
- ◆ Sixth is the gradual process of allowing a democratic political culture to grow and permeate the political landscape. Culture as

learned behaviour or "habits of the heart" plays a very strong role in the transformation of the society. Aspects of African traditional political culture, history and cosmology must be brought into bear in the efforts to produce a lasting democratic enterprise.

In all of the above, concrete educational programmes aimed at promoting and strengthening democracy must be emphasised. Here the collective history of the nation, the constitution detailing the rights and obligations of citizens and the rule of law, political culture and behaviour, political party development and electoral rules and procedures must be packaged and taught to the people in a systematic manner. This type of education for citizenship will go a long way to cultivate a bottom-up understanding of the imperatives of democratic development.

### Conclusions

The eminent Historian Ade Ajayi (2005) has pointed out that the difference between a politician and a statesman is a sense of history. The politician can only work for today but the statesman has a memory of the past and a vision of tomorrow. He uses history as a rear view mirror, to chart the way forward for his society. We have noted in this paper that democracy and development are strongly linked. A responsive democracy that is capable of ensuring good governance more often

than not fosters the development of a society. We have also noted that emerging democracies like many in the West African sub-region face a number of challenges in their bid to strengthen their democracies. We have isolated education for citizenship as a primary vehicle for combating these challenges and driving forward the process of constructing democratic development.

Political actors in the sub-region must network to find common solutions to problems that confront them. They must speed up the process of cementing building blocks of relationship that will enable them to face the challenges of a world increasingly driven by global economic and political variables. They also must be at the forefront of a cultural renaissance that will see the true African spirit triumph over the so-called tyranny of our ancestors. They must learn lesson of the statesmen before them who constructed vast empires known the world-over in an age where communication and infrastructure as we have today did not exist. African creativity, humanity and value systems must be brought to bear in an enabling environment that will allow our people to express themselves. We believe that at the pan-regional level, a stronger implementation of the peer review system of the African Union as well as constant validation of the African charter on human and people's rights will also contribute to strengthening democracy. Also important is a regular and continuous

audit of the democratic processes to ensure that backsliding as we have witnessed in some countries do not recur.

Democracy in the words of Adam Michnik;

*...is neither black nor red. Democracy is gray...It chooses banality over excellence, shrewdness over nobility, empty promise over true competence...It is eternal imperfection, a mixture of sinfulness, saintliness and monkey business. This is why the seekers of a moral state and of a perfectly just society do not like democracy. Yet only democracy...having the capacity to question itself...also has the capacity to correct its own mistakes...G-Gray is beautiful. (Quoted in Bardhan, 2000)*

Development remains a consistent item on the agenda of the humankind. It is as fixed as the northern star. Social formations that negate human development can only be temporary as they contradict the iron law of change. In history we remind all that it is possible to use cosmetic surgery to disguise old age. However such surgery cannot be used to arrest old age. Politicians in the sub-region must understand this as they continue with the difficult process of constructing democratic development. ■

\***Yakubu A. Ochefu**, is a Professor of Economic History at the Benue State University, and the National President of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Makurdi, Nigeria

*The paper was presented at the first regional conference of political parties in West Africa, Accra Ghana, 28-29 July, 2006*

## References

- Adejumobi, S. (2000) "Between Democracy and Development in Africa: What are the missing links?", A paper presented to the World Bank Conference on Development Thinking in the New Millennium, Paris, 2000.
- Ajayi, A (2005) "History and Society", Keynote address to the 50th Anniversary Congress of the Historical Society of Nigeria, Ibadan.
- Bardham, P. "Symposium on Democracy and Development", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7,3.
- Barrow, R.J. (1997), "Determinants of Economic Growth: A Cross Country Empirical Study", *Development Discussion paper*, No. 579, Harvard Institute of International Development.
- Boix, C. (2001), "Democracy, Development and the Public Sector", *American Journal of Political Science*, 45:1
- Boutros-Ghali, B. (2003) *The Interaction between Democracy and Development*, UNESCO, Paris
- Diamond, L. (2005) "Democracy, Development and Good Governance: The Inseparable Links," maiden Annual Democracy and Governance Lecture of the Ghana Centre for Democratic Development, Accra.
- Elahi, K and Danopoulos, C. (2004) "Democracy, Capitalism and Development", *Journal of Security Sector Management*, Vol. 2, No. 2.
- Elstor, J. (1996) "The impact of Constitutions on Economic Performance" Proceedings of the World Bank Annual Conference on Development Economics.
- Gerring, J, Thacker, S and Alfaro, R. (2006) "Democracy and Human Development" "Governance, Democracy and Development in Africa: A Cultural Approach". Position paper by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development (CDD-Ghana) presented at the International Conference on the Cultural Approach to Development in Africa, Dakar, 2001.
- Gyimah-Boadi, E. (2001) "Governance Institutions and Values in National Development" Legon: ISSER, Lal, D. (1999), "Culture, Democracy and Informal Institutions on Development", paper presented at the IMF Conference on Second Generation Reforms
- Marshall, M.G and Keith, J (2000), "Policy IV Project: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800-2000". [www.cidem.umd.edu/insert/polity](http://www.cidem.umd.edu/insert/polity)
- Moon, B and William, D (1985) "Politics, the State and Basic Human Needs: A Cross National Study", *American Journal of Political Science*, 29:4
- Munch, R. (2002), "Globalisation and Democracy: A New "Great Transformation?" *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*.
- Munck, G and Jay, V (2002), "Measuring Democracy: Evaluating Alternative Indices", *Comparative Political Studies*, 35:1
- Olson, M (1993) "Dictatorship, Democracy and Development", *American Political Science Review*
- Pei, M. (1999) "Economic Institutions, Democracy and Development", World Bank Conference on Democracy, Market Economy and Development, Seoul, Korea
- Przeworski, A. et al (2000), *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and material well being in the world. 1950-1990*, Cambridge, CUP
- Przeworski, A and Limongi, F (1993), "Political Regimes and Economic Growth", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 7, 3
- Ross, M (2005) "Is Democracy Good for the Poor?" Department of Political Science, UCLA
- Sahan, P and Stifel, D (2000), "Poverty Comparisons over time and across countries in Africa", *World Development*, 28:12
- Stiglitz, J (1999) "The Role of Participation in Development", Paper presented at the Conference on Democracy, Market Economy and Development, Seoul, Korea.