



# African democracy: work in progress

## Moving to better governance and inclusive growth

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Observing the presidential election campaign in the US, a more than 200-year-old democracy, provides a reminder of the need for some perspective when assessing the progress of democracy in Africa.

That a vast majority of Africa's 54 nations are now democracies is a good thing. This represents a radical shift away from the military dictatorships that dominated the continent just a quarter of a century ago.

The shift has come about partly in response to the innate urge for individual human freedom and free societies, and partly in response to the hegemonic forces of globalisation as the cold war ended in the late 1980s and the struggle between the Soviet and US superpowers ended on American terms.

Moreover – as a result of this – it has also come about in part in response to the felt need in African nations to meet the evolving minimum requirement for legitimacy in a global order increasingly based on democratic norms (even if the main international institution that spread these norms, the UN, is not fully democratic).

Democracy has been broadly good for Africa, but not because the dictatorships it replaced could not have created progress. Those military regimes failed largely because they were self-serving, and lacked a world view of economic transformation.

### Mixed election outcomes

Elections in Africa in 2015-16 have pointed to progress and challenges, as well as the evolving maturity of pluralistic political spaces.

In Nigeria, an opposition party led by Muhammadu Buhari, a former military leader, defeated Goodluck Jonathan, the incumbent president, in a national presidential election in 2015. Even more remarkably, Jonathan conceded defeat and oversaw a peaceful transfer of power to the new government.

In South Africa, the majority African National Congress' hold on political power has slipped significantly this year as opposition party candidates make significant inroads in mayoral races in important urban centres.

In east and central Africa, Tanzania held successful presidential elections in 2015. However, polls in Uganda were marred by controversies over allegations of political repression by Yoweri Museveni, president for the past three decades. Burundi descended into civil conflict in 2015 as President Pierre



Muhammadu Buhari, President of Nigeria

Nkurunziza sought to extend his hold on power by removing constitutional term limits.

In Rwanda, the country's parliament in 2015 voted to remove term limits to the

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leadership of Paul Kagame. In some ways reminiscent of Singapore's Lee Kwan Yew, Kagame has led his country from an age of genocide in 1994 to a new era of development and undeniable economic progress, even as western governments question his human rights record.

### Democratic ethos

It is clear that the rituals of democracy such as voting by themselves do not constitute the sum of real democracy. More important – and needed in Africa – is a deepening of the democratic ethos.

Acquiring power through the ballot box needs to be accompanied by a sense of the limitations imposed by the real meaning of democratic governance, including the strengthening of independent institutions and the tolerance of dissent. There is a need to guard against 'democratic despotism' – a

'licence' conferred by winning elections to quash the voices of opposition.

Additionally, democracy in Africa needs to be organised around ideas that can lead to real progress. Such ideas incorporate inclusive economic growth that will make the popular notion of 'Africa rising' more real than the media- or investor-led hype that has soured of late, even as the continent remains a business destination of today and tomorrow.

Too often, elections are still contests for control of power and patronage resources by ethnic and religious identities. Zambia's presidential elections in August point to a regression towards these motivating forces. These atomistic definitions of self-interest have blocked the emergence of more unifying national visions that create real progress.

Third, an important lesson of Africa's democratic trajectory is that, to create real wealth for Africa's nations, democratic contests will require the participation of technocrats skilled in the art and science of leadership, economics, public policy and management, engineering, and innovation.

This trend is already taking root in a few countries such as Ghana. In many other countries, the old guard of 'chartered politicians' still holds sway, conflating the longevity of their political careers with their perceived ability to take their citizens into the future in a competitive world. Africa's citizens and voters must be educated to recognise the difference. ■

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