

Implications of Universalizing Liberal Democracy on Non-Western Societies: Africa in Focus

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Received: February 6, 2019; **Accepted:** February 13, 2019; **Published:** February 17, 2019

Abstract: Although political culture as a framework for analysis revolves around and implies a trivialization of political economy, the focus here is to evaluate it as a complex whole in a bid to regurgitate the supposed interplay between culture and institutions. Contrary to conventional knowledge the study upon reviewing relevant theoretical and parochial literature is of the views that no individual or society was birthed with democratic or non-democratic culture. Further claiming such values are inculcated over time conditioned by certain socializing agents in a given society. However, on the viability of liberal democracy in non-Western societies, it opines attempt to replicate with little or no efforts at domestication has affected the probability of liberal democracy to bring about certain predetermined outcomes. Against this; the research is of the views that governments or its institutions should not be imposed; rather it should embody the collective shared and adhered values cum beliefs and prevailing norms in a society. Alternatively, in ethnic heterogeneous societies such as Africa, it could be arrived at by consciously ingraining and teaching values such as tolerance, moderation, efficacy, and amongst others participatory orientation which is thought to be conducive for democracy. The single most important aspect for this study remains its clamor for domestication as opposed to the current system of copy and paste.

Keywords: Liberal Democracy, Political Culture, Political Socialization, Institutions, Governance, Western and Non-western societies.

Citation: Yahaya Yakubu. 2019. Implications of Universalizing Liberal Democracy on Non-Western Societies: Africa in Focus. International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research, 3(2): 159-164.

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Introduction

Overwhelmingly, the growing rate of democratic transitions, relative political openings and regularity of competitive elections across the continent substantiates the argument that presupposes democracy as the most popular form of governance in the 21st century, more so its liberal form. While Africans have shown overwhelming support for democracy, more than often they approach it with as much hope as it does with skepticism. For Diamond (2008) the fears of the citizens are rational because democracy conceived on the aspirations of furthering citizen welfare, risk turning into absolutism as elected officials tend to run governments that are antipodal to democracy. The situation is further complicated by successive governments who profess commitment to democracy at electoral rallies and inaugural speeches ending up espousing authoritative tendencies.

Nonetheless, contemporary Africa once a notorious haven for rapacious and resilient authoritarian regimes, have joined the bandwagon of countries practicing liberal democracy or at the least certain aspects of it.

Resultantly, democracy albeit its shortcomings in Africa have not only become popular, it has brought about certain degree of accommodative and competitive politics. Although a better part of the African continent maintains a semblance of democratic order, as it does its institutions; the future of liberal democracy as obtained in the continent faces formidable threats. As beneath the façade of liberal democratic order lies a crack depicting the inherent volatility that characterizes its existence.

The arbitrary transplantation of liberal democratic values in non-western Africa has shed a light of the plausible effects of cultural relatively that has been argued as the primary propellant of the growth and social acceptance of liberal democracy in the West. On the contrary the rather visible challenges associated with the practice of democracy in Africa have been ascribed to the absence of lacking similar cultural groundings that favors democracy. While authoritarian resilience, military incursions and one party state may have becomes less popular and regular elections are fast becoming a norm in the African political landscape, the future of democracy in the continent as well as its probability of actualizing certain predetermined outcomes remains particularly uncertain.

Relatedly, Puddington (2007) is of the opinion that democratic consolidation in Africa has remained particularly slow, often headed the wrong direction and casually reserved by politics of self-indulgence and self-seeking policies. Crowning the political terrain in the continent with faltering democracies hurtling towards disaster.

While an all inclusive theoretical discussion on the plausible contextual determinants or constraints of liberal democracy in Africa surpasses the scope of this research, the research builds on the cultural relative arguments, parlaying its its theoretical foundations and precepts in a bid to account for the current state of liberal democracy in Africa.

Research Methodology

Been a theoretical and conceptual literary endeavor, the study employs a qualitative method of social inquiry. Hence, it will rely on pre-existing secondary literature for the purpose of collecting data upon which deductions will be arrived at. The clandestine nature of the phenomena under interrogation makes it cumbersome to use primary sources of data collection. In lieu, the data obtained will be discussed extensively using thematic interpretations and content analytical tools.

Research Question

In lieu of the pernicious effects of the plethora of crises that characterizes the continent, pertinent question such as the following is being posed.

- i. How viable is liberal democracy in Africa?

Conceptual Framework

By way of complementing the introductory content of this study, this section is committed to clarifying on the concept of democracy with laid emphasis on its liberal form and culture which will be interrogated from a political perspective. This underlying clarification of both concepts is thought to be significantly pertinent as they constitutes the stod upon which analysis will be made.

Democracy

Democracy remains one of the most fluid concept in social science owing to its theoretical and practical variations across time and space. As a concept it also defied attempts at attaining a universal consensus as to what it entails definitively. According to Ngwainmbi (2014, p. 547) democracy ascends in a well bonded group or tribe, also in a condition where the government is determined by the 'whole population' and the individual matters. Democracy arises in a well bonded group. In contrasting these concepts, we materialize with a consensus belief that democracy was practiced in other parts of the world where people had rules that governed their actions and each individual or population played a role toward the wellbeing of the group. Hence, there is liberal democracy. There is also illiberal democracy. On the contrary Schumpeter (1950) is of the opinion that democracy does not entail rule by the people, but that it is a structure by which decision making apparatus is transferred to individuals who have attained power in a competitive contest for the votes or mandates of citizens. The above definitions depict what is understood in the literature as minimalist conception of democracy.

In criticizing the minimalist conception, Ademola (2009) argued that without effective guarantees of civil liberties, elections do not constitute democracy, and that a practical minimum for outlining democracy must comprise not only elections, but realistically broad assurances of basic civil rights - such as freedom of speech, association and assembly. Hence, beyond the procedural electoral minimum, maximalist scholars of democracy have identified further characteristics that must be present for these basic procedures to meaningfully constitute a democracy. Robert Dahl, for instance, advances three essential conditions for the well-functioning multiparty democracy. These are: a) extensive competition by political candidates and their groups or parties 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 Dahl (1971, p. 221). The underlying maximalist conception is understood within this study as liberal democracy.

Culture

Culture in abstract terms entails the dominant way of life as obtained in a society. For Avruch (1998) culture is a multifaceted phenomenon which embraces knowledge, arts, beliefs, morals, laws, customs and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society. Based on this conception culture entails a collection of attitudes, values and behavior of a group of people. Hence culture can be argued to entail identifiable traits that conditions and distinguish a group from another.

In a notable attempt to literary establish the effect of culture on democracy Almond and Verba (1963) developed a model in which they interviewed a sample of 1,000 respondents in (USA, Mexico, Great Britain, Germany and Italy) and defined a measure for political attitudes, perceptions and trends. They theorize political culture remains a precondition for the operation of any political system.

In a related attempt, Roland and Gorodnichenko devised a model of democratization on the basis of individualist and collectivist culture. They claim societies with individualist culture, in spite of potentially being less able to address collective-action limitations, are more likely to adopt a democracy faster than those with collectivist culture. In assent Yakubu (2018) are of the opinion that while the above studies may be criticized for its limitations in terms of numerical value of participants and countries covered, they tender an understanding into the argument on the existence of a plausible correlation between culture and institutions.

Against this, it is of the opinion of the study values of liberal democracy is entrenched in the very idea that liberal democratic value is embedded in the primacy of individualism, which seems to be in contrast with collectivism thought to be embedded in African societies. The large family sizes in the region, kinship ties and ethnic affiliations amongst other contextual realities make individualism a difficult feat to attain. While such arguments may make for hasty conclusion, the study argues the idea of individualism or collectivism does not occur by chance, they are rational human decisions taken for maximization of utility amongst other factors. In lieu, there lies the need to examine the presuppositions of the cultural relative argument, in this study's bid to ascertain the viability of liberal democracy in non-western liberal societies, with Africa in view.

Analytical Framework

The study will attempt to theorize culture; with a view to examining its supposed conditioning attributes on institutional outcomes. Although political culture as a framework for analysis revolves around and implies a trivialization of political economy, the focus here is to evaluate as a complex whole of social interaction in a society. This will regurgitate the supposed interplay between culture and institutions.

Cultural theory derives from a diverse array of disciplines, which seeks to associate prevailing situations or phenomena as resulting from socially accepted values, practices and norms of a group of people. In this regards Sadar (2004) opines the approaches to studying culture may vary, but they tend to more than often encompass, arguments that claims that subject matters in terms of cultural power are related to societal outcomes. While for Almond (1956, p. 397) he defines culture from a political perspective to be a systematic and explicit formulation of a general orientation to politics, leaving political culture to encompass the vaguer and more implicit orientations. More articulately, Seedlow (2013) concludes that if politics proffers the puzzle of who gets what, when, where, and how, then political culture plays an integral role to the answer. Further claiming, should politics be conceived as an art of the possible, then political culture aids in conditioning the limits of that art, for culture dictates socially accepted values in a given society.

For this study however, political culture encumbers common values and beliefs of a society conditioned by certain historical antecedents and hereditary traits and practices in the realm of politics. The hereditary traits thought be inherent in political culture is made possible by a socialization process which a society acquires and passes down enduring traits and orientations towards political activities and politics in general. Accordingly, Heyman (1959) argues political socialization as an individual's inculcation of social patterns or traits in congruent to his immediate societal position as conditioned via a number of dominant agents of societal socialization.

Further claiming it as a predominantly informal learning process experienced by members of society as a result of social cohesion through and with family members, peers, colleagues, religious institutions and the likes Heyman (1959). While for Merelman (1986) political socialization denotes a sequence by which people imbibe resilient orientations, that shapes their perspectives towards politics and political institutions as a complex whole. In furtherance, Seedlow (2013) in another instance presupposes political socialization to mean a process that produces and reinstates cultural behavior on issues bordering around but not limited to; power, legitimacy, authority, and public policy. The underlying process for this study is thought to be primarily constrained by centrifugal socializing agents such as parents, teachers, clergy, business owners and media programmers, and public officials.

Against the backdrop of on-going discussion, the study is of the strong view that the underlying agents listed above are central to re-enforcing and sustaining socially adhered norms in societal consciousness, with respect to type of government, its purpose, and the role of the masses and citizenry in such political arrangements. Comprehensively pre-existing political culture tends to aid in the perpetuation of existing political institutions of governance. Summarily, Seedlow (2013) is of the view that it is not uncommon for political-cultural studies to focus on isolating the political attitudes, values, dogmas, and principles that are attendant with and benefit in explaining the behaviors of specific individuals, groups, and institutions, and to study how the latter in turn underwrite to the development of the former. Amongst other notable authorities the likes of Gabriel Almond, Harry Eckstein, Daniel Elazar, Ronald Inglehart, Robert Putnam, Sidney Verba, and Aaron Wildavsky. Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963) and Putnam's *Making Democracy Work* (1993) and *Bowling Alone* (2000) have sought to empirically and theoretical interrogate the existence of a plausible interplay between prevailing culture and thriving institutions of governance.

With recourse to this study, prior literature has tended to largely blame the absence of practical liberal democracy in contemporary Africa on the absence of democratic culture. While some focused on the absence of individuality in the continent, owing to resilient family ties, ethnic heterogeneity and cultural diversity others such as the on-going attempt to question and interrogate the plausible implications of transplanting liberal democratic values on non-liberal societies. While the centrifugal role of socially accepted norms in fostering institutional, political and policy outcomes cannot be downplayed; the study categorically assents that no single society or individual was born with particular attitudes towards governance and politics, such attitudes are formed over time.

Should we assent that political culture are ingrains resulting from a complex process of socialization, arguably liberal democratic culture can thus be ingrained a non-liberal society. The danger of this assumption however may abound in the fact that non-Western societies rather than ingraining and imbibing values conducive for a thriving democracy, they tend to skip socialization process and attempt to replicate democracy as obtained in mainly the United States and Britain with little attempts at domestication. In furtherance, it argues that some analysis on the state of democracy in the developing world, employ Eurocentric or alien indicators for the purpose of measuring the former.

Conclusion

The practical realities and subsequent challenges of liberal democracy in contemporary Africa induce us to recognize that political structures should not be imposed or given arbitrarily, but should be a product of collective decisions that reflects an embodiment of shared values, belief and attitudes. In lieu, practicing and subsequent institutionalization of liberal democracy may require amongst others unwavering commitments from both figure heads and citizens to change their attitudes toward constitutional democracy. Leaders must adhere too and operate a transparent, responsive and accountable government that upholds rule of law, ensure equality of citizens regardless of ethnic or other social affiliations.

Conclusively, democratic cultures are not genetically implanted or inherited; they are consciously learned over time. Consequently, the practice of democracy should be thought to its practitioners should it stand a chance at attaining predetermined outcomes. In lieu, the level to which democracy is institutionalized in a given society is thought to be proportional to such society's inculcation and adherence to democratic values, norms and beliefs. Hence,

contrary to conventional knowledge; the study argues democracy as a form of government is predominantly universal but differs across time and space. And that while it is championed by the west, democracy or at least its properties of fairness, equality, transparency, rule of law and the likes existed in non-western societies. Indigenous political institutions or traditional institutions as referred to in dominant literature extol certain values of contemporary liberal democracy. Hence, the study refutes claims that presupposes and assents to the in-viability of democracy in Africa.

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