At-issue

A Third Wave? Creeping Autocracy in Africa

UCHENNA C. OBIAGU

Abstract: Nearly all modern states are democracies premised on multiparty electoral systems for leadership recruitment. Despite their aim of ensuring peaceful power transfer, however, elections in most African developing countries are riddled with electoral and political violence and result in autocratization, manifesting in the decline of democratic traits. This piece argues that violence explains the deteriorating state of democracy in Africa. It further contends that most African political actors have an orientation of politics as a do-or-die game devoid of any meaningful rules and regulations guiding how the game is played. They do not consider electoral defeat as a critical component of democratic process. Thus, these actors view violence as a lucrative political strategy to manipulate the electoral process and influence its outcomes at the detriment of peaceful transfer of power through credible elections. To reverse the autocratization trends through peaceful elections in Africa and beyond, there is a need to strengthen institutions which will adequately regulate electoral and political activities and deter political actors from using violence in the contestation for state power.

Keywords: elections, violence, autocratization, institutions

Introduction

Lührmann et al. viewed autocratization as a growing challenge but exempted Africa as resilient to the threat.[1] Conversely, the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute observed that autocratization has spread its tentacles by affecting the entire globe, including Africa.[2] The bases of these arguments are underpinned by the liberal democracy index (LDI) and/or the electoral democracy index (EDI) within the state of democracy. The debate seemingly appears to be somewhat recent in extant literature; however when situated with the pendulum of representative democracy and electoral contests vis-à-vis the undemocratic consequences of violence, it becomes obvious that autocratization in Africa has been an unending challenge bedeviling the continent.

Interestingly, elections are identified as the most visible element of democracy and any attack thereon results in a deteriorating state of democracy—that is, autocratization.[3] Politics in Africa is viewed as a do-or-die activity, however, and losing an election is not considered as a meaningful part of democratization. Because of this, political actors make efforts to interfere and control critical electoral democratic institutions: electoral management bodies, political parties, security agencies, and courts.[4] These institutions respectively conduct free, fair and credible elections, canvass for votes, secure the electoral process, and allow redress for electoral wrongdoing. The essence of desired control is to disadvantage those who may stand on the way of their power acquisition motives. For these actors, state power is

Uchenna C. Obiagu is a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science, University of Nigeria, Nsukka. He has published widely, including in the *International Journal of Public Administration and Community Development: Journal of the Community Development Society*.

acquired to enrich themselves and not as a means to serve the governed and ensure the public good.[5]

Further, electoral and political violence is the driving force propelling autocratization in Africa. The quest to control institutions of democracy so as to favorably influence the electoral process fosters the autocratizing trend on the continent. If we agree that violence—whether electoral or political—is counterproductive to democratic growth and also acknowledge that most elections in Africa have been fraught with cases of violence, then it becomes plausible to assert that autocratization has consistently been part of the democratic experience in Africa. This assertion, by implication, is beyond the recent exemption-inclusion analysis as espoused by Lührmann and Lindberg and the V-Dem theses.[6]

What Constitutes Autocratization?

Given the struggles of some African countries with weak electoral institutions to adequately regulate electoral contests, there is a heightened incentive to use violence as a political strategy in the contestation for state power.[7] This explains the preponderance of cases of electoral and political violence in Africa. Previous research notes that violence poses a danger to free, fair and credible elections and, generally, endangers the growth of democracy.[8] Peaceful acquisition or transfer of power through a credible electoral process is a central part of the concept of democracy the world over.

Just like other concepts in political science, there are different interpretations for autocratization. For instance, Slovik defines autocracy as a regime "that do[es] not meet established criteria for democracy."[9] Brooker asserts that autocracy is a "rule by other means than democracy."[10] It is further argued that autocracy sets in when "an executive achieved power through undemocratic means."[11] Another study identifies political participation, public contestation, and executive limitation as the major dimensions to differentiate various regime types.[12] Based on rich V-Dem dataset, Lührmann and Lindberg address conceptual and empirical gaps as to what constitutes autocratization, which they define as a "substantial de facto decline of core institutional requirements for electoral democracy…based on Dahl's famous conceptualization of electoral democracy as 'polyarchy,' namely clean elections, freedom of association, universal suffrage, an elected executive, as well as freedom of expression and alternative sources of information."[13]

Autocratization is apparently an unwelcome but inevitable political reality in the world today. "Democratization in reverse," "de-democratization," and "antipode of democratization" are some of the various expressions to describe autocratization.[14] Recent annual reports on democracy by the Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) have used "democratic setbacks" and "democratic recession" to describe the dwindling state of democracy, which results in autocratization episodes and arises from discrete attacks on core democratic institutions.[15] Similarly, Bermeo employs "democratic backsliding"—state-sponsored elimination of core state institutions that sustain democracy—to describe the same phenomenon.[16]

There is a general consensus among scholars and political scientists that democracy—a representative political system founded on popular sovereignty and constitutionalism that safeguards fundamental human rights and the rule of law, and allows competitive multiparty elections based on universal suffrage—is deteriorating both in form and shape, as well as in quality and quantity. Also, the trio of 2020 annual reports on democracy by V-Dem, EIU, and Freedom House collectively affirm concern for the state of democracy

worldwide. Even those who rebut the alarming notion of Diamond's "democratic rollback" have equally noted worrying concerns for democratic regimes in terms of political rights and civil liberties.[17]

Autocratization is the antipode of democratization or produces movement away from democracy in terms of degree which can occur in democracies and autocracies alike.[18] Democracies can lose democratic traits in varying degrees without fully breaking down or plunging into an autocratic regime, often long before it is noticed. It is possible for countries to display illiberal democratic traits (e.g. Hungary) without fully changing or becoming authoritarian. Non-democratic regimes can be placed on a long spectrum ranging from closed autocracies (e.g. Saudi Arabia, North Korea, Sudan, and Eritrea) to electoral autocracies with varying degrees of democracy. Countries can suddenly move away from democracy, leading to a period of democratic breakdown. Such moves could be gradual in earlier periods and sudden in later periods. However, "democratic breakdown" excludes studies of the protracted undermining of democratic institutions (*autogolpe*—auto-coup or self-coup), the unfinished degeneration of qualities in democracies, and the waning away of partial democratic qualities in electoral authoritarian regimes.[19]

Lührmann and Lindberg use "democratic recession" to describe an autocratization process taking place within existing democracies; "democratic breakdown" to explain the change from democracy to autocracy; and "autocratic consolidation" to denote gradual declines of democratic traits in already authoritarian situations.[20] Autocratization is a broad concept that covers both sudden breakdown of democracy (usually rare today) and gradual or subtle processes taking place in both democratic and autocratic regimes, where democratic traits decline and lead to either less democratic or more autocratic systems. Without being stuck in the seemingly unending debate, autocratization is simply a product of deteriorating democratic realities: democratic breakdowns, setbacks, reversal, or recessions; decline in democratic attributes; and/or regime change from democracy to autocracy.

The foregoing discussion conceives autocracy and its derivative process of autocratization from the point of view of democratic deterioration. Hence, an attack on elections and electoral institutions becomes the first elemental sign of autocratization. Autocratization can affect democracies with gradual setbacks under a legal façade.[21] Leaders who assume power through democratic process, but are, indeed, authoritarian make every effort to ridicule democratic virtues of accountability, the rule of law, transparency, competitiveness, and representation.[22] They deploy far-reaching means to set democracy backwards and these include, but not limited to: a) legalizing only nongovernmental organizations that secretly promote government agenda; b) using election observers who validate intended results of government; and c) paying public relations firms to sell a positive image of their government. In sum, "All of these moves enable authoritarian governments to pretend to be democratic while making it more difficult to charge that they are not."[23]

Violence and Autocratization in Africa

While it is not under contention that autocratization entails democratic setbacks, declines in democratic attributes, or regime change from democracy to autocracy, it is not expressly clear as to how the quest to control institutions of electoral democracy and the use of

violence as a political tool find their expression in autocratization in Africa. Political scientists and scholars are in general agreement on the basic elements of democracy, including but not limited to: periodic and regular multiparty elections, rule of law, and majority rule with minority rights.[24] Democracy is about power acquisition and election is the widely accepted democratic means of acquiring power. Thus, elections occupy a central position in the practice of democracy. The most obvious sign of democratic reversal is when an attempt is made to use violence to influence/manipulate electoral process and determine its outcomes.[25] More subtly, a reversal can occur when the press is gagged, when electoral rules are subverted, or when dissent views are suppressed.[26]

Broadly, electoral and political violence covers a wide range of causes, concepts, and consequences. Specifically, electoral and political violence are caused by a variety of factors such as electoral malpractices, lack of internal party democracy leading to imposition of candidates, vote and turnout buying, abuse of constitutional provisions, and non-compliance with electoral laws guiding the conduct of elections. Its manifestations, outcomes, or consequences such as low voter turnout, reversal of previous democratic, and loss of lives and property are not only destabilizing, but also destructive. Conceptually, political violence is defined as the use of force or coercive acts to cause physical or somatic injury to perceived or actual opponents in order to influence their behavior for political purposes within the context of the state. Electoral violence is primarily restricted to power acquisition within the context of state elections.[27]

Electoral violence involves the use of coercive acts, compelling threats, and intimidating utterances by politicians to deliberately influence electoral process and determine its outcomes.[28] It is prevalent in climes that create the incentives to use violence as a power acquisition strategy either by the ruling elites who seek to remain in power or by opposition groups. Violence is especially attractive to incumbents when it becomes apparent that they might not be able to recruit the necessary votes to remain in power. Most electoral violence in Africa is orchestrated by incumbents, even when they are in possession of major resources to win elections.[29] Thus, violence becomes a political strategy of governments particularly when their political future appears bleak and uncertain.[30] Similarly, violence is used by opposition groups when it is clear that they cannot match the advantage associated with the incumbent, usually before the election period (e.g. the 2007 and 2011 general elections in Nigeria).[31] The attempt to use violence to manipulate the process breeds a frustrating experience in the practice of democracy and portends serious danger to development.

Undoubtedly, electoral violence is a subtype of political violence.[32] However, the concept—whether electoral, domestic, civil or political violence—is unified by its compelling, intimidating, coercive, and lethal components. Violence whittles down the democratic value of elections by substituting free choice with coercion, deterring participation, and reducing voter's turnout.[33] Again, harassment and intimidation have been identified as more common features of elections in Africa than lethal violence.[34] Many elections in Africa are marred by varying cases of violence during the campaign period, on the election day, and after the elections.[35] Electoral violence can: a) result in casualty tolls that meet the threshold of civil war; b) reverse democratic gains made previously; c) undo years of peace building and development work; d) undermine democratic institutions, or; e) even trigger civil war.[36]

Electoral and Political Violence in Africa

A fundamental question is: can democracy exist when there are high levels of electoral violence? To answer this question, it is important to note that free and fair as well as peaceful and credible elections are a fundamental indicator of healthy democratic growth and sustainability. Violence, on the other hand, runs at variance with the democratic process. Violence vitiates the democratic value of election—the most visible element of democracy.[37] While it is possible to conduct elections in turbulent areas (e.g. in Nigeria where elections have been conducted despite Boko Haram insurgency), violence grossly depletes not only voter participation (as witnessed in low turnout) but also influences election outcomes against popular choices. Thus, the cases of electoral and political violence discussed below buttress the argument that violence erodes democratic growth and is the driving force for increasing cases of autocratization in the African context.

Accordingly, Bekoe contends that electoral violence undermines democratization and serves as a precursor to civil war (at least Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Republic of Congo are examples).[38] Relatedly, the post-election violence of the 2010 polls in Côte d'Ivoire led to loss of human and material resources: more than 1,000 civilian deaths, one million internally displaced persons, and 100,000 refugees in neighboring countries.[39] Similar violent experiences have repeatedly been witnessed in other countries like Gabon, Ghana, Nigeria, Togo, Kenya, and Zimbabwe.[40] A survey study in which electoral satisfaction was used as a framework to assess the level of political development in eighteen countries revealed that (with the exception of Ghana, Botswana, and Namibia) most had cases of unsatisfactory electoral processes.[41] While the former group had satisfactory electoral experience and conceived elections as a progressive means of engaging the government and opposition actors, elections in the latter group were characterized by violence.[42]

Similarly, another study revealed that political violence incidents increased by four percent in a single year (12,739 in 2019 as against 12,227 in 2018).[43] Fatalities also increased by one percent (28,065 reported fatalities in 2019 as against 27,823 in 2018) with substantial increases in Burkina Faso, Libya, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Mozambique. Political violence in the Sahel (Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mauritius, and Mali) covered by Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), continues to deteriorate (more than 2,100 political violence and protest events and over 5,360 reported fatalities in 2019).[44] These figures are nearly twice as many reported fatalities occurred across the five Sahel countries in 2018, thereby making 2019 the deadliest for the Sahel in over 20 years.

In Kenya, electoral violence has consistently dominated the political process since the 1990s and voters have repeatedly voted for candidates associated with wrongdoing and violence.[45] The basis for electing these candidates is usually on their perceived capability to improve the economic conditions of the people, notwithstanding the fact that a good number condemn the use of violence as a political strategy. This strand of explanation contends that candidates control a majority of uninformed and, sometimes, informed voters, who are readily available to help politicians to win elections. This class of voters mostly comprises the poor who have not practically conquered their basic economic needs and those who have previously had experience with electoral violence.[46]

While multiparty and competitive elections may have become regular and periodic in most African countries, it is also true that these elections have differed greatly in form,

content and quality; and the greater regularity has not necessarily enhanced their value or improved the quality of democracy on the continent.[47] Opposition parties are legal and are allowed to compete in elections with their candidates on the ballot for various offices, but how many of these contests were of high quality is another question given that irregularities in the registration of voters have become common.[48] Also, there are empirical data on cases of irregularity on election results from some of the polling stations and all these put a serious question mark on the integrity of these elections.[49] There is a link between democratic setbacks and electoral irregularities.[50]

Consequently, recent development in pronounced cases of attack on critical democratic assets like elections and human freedoms are consistently and gradually stunting the growth of democracy, reversing its gains, and culminating in autocratization episodes in Africa.[51] The recent military coup d'état in Mali in which mutinous Malian soldiers arrested and detained top government and military officers, including President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita and Prime Minister Boubou Cisse on 18 August 2020, shows that sudden democratic breakdown (military coup), is still a reality, albeit unpopular, in Africa.[52]

Autocratization and the State of Democracy in Africa

The tsunamic ripples of autocratization are real and pronounced in Africa. The continent contains the vast majority of clientelistic autocratizing democracies and autrocatic rule has entrenched itself.[53] Today, Africa has a deteriorating record of democracy vis-à-vis V-Dem's LDI and EDI. From V-Dem's 2020 annual report, out of fifty-four African countries (plus Zanzibar), the most positive electoral democracy is Cape Verde which ranks twenty eighth in the world.[54] Conversely, the worst ranked autocratic state in the world is Eritrea, with no substantial sign of change in the near future. V-Dem results in 2020 reveal a deteriorating democratic experience in Africa through 2019. Democratization progression in Africa revolves around three (5.45 percent) liberal democracies and eighteen (32.73 percent) electoral democracies while there are twenty-eight (50.91 percent) electoral autocracies and six (10.91 percent) closed autocracies in the same decade. Total autocratizing states in the period under investigation are thirty-four (61.82 percent).[55] Regrettably, the democratizing trend deteriorates in 2020 V-Dem report with three (5.45 percent) liberal democracies and only thirteen (23.73 percent) electoral democracies. Autocratizing states increased with thirty-two (58.18 percent) electoral autocracies and seven (12.73 percent) closed autocracies.[56] These figures bring the total number of autocratizing African states to thirty-nine (representing a whopping 70.91 percent of the fifty-five African states) compared to thirty-four recorded in 2019 report.

Comparing the Freedom House 1990 and 2020 reports, a similar deteriorating progression is noted. Botswana, Gambia, and Mauritius were the only African electoral democracies in 1989-90. Although one-party African states such as Tanzania and Mozambique embraced democracy, opened up their states to more inclusive representation, and implemented market-driven programs, there are still twenty-four African states that are 'not free' and only seven are 'free' out of forty-nine electoral democracies captured in Freedom House's 2020 annual report.[57]

Conclusion

This piece discussed the lingering issues relating to electoral and political violence in Africa and how violence finds its expression in the creeping reality of autocracy and the process of

autocratization. Electoral and political violence helps explain the deteriorating state of democracy in Africa. Most African political actors view politics as a zero-sum game and do not consider electoral defeat as a critical aspect of democratic process. Based on this political mindset, the actors make every possible attempt to control strategic state institutions that are involved in the electoral process and use them to realize predetermined political goals, usually against popular choices on which the foundation of democratic survival and growth is laid. Thus, the idea of administrative and financial autonomy for electoral democratic institutions primarily exists in name only, or in legal codes, but not in their operational activities. Violence during elections depletes democratic virtues and developmental values associated with elections. It also presents a serious threat to the growth of democracy on the continent. It bears the imprint of gradual erosion of democratic value of the rule of law and replaces it with rule by law, manifesting in cases of human rights abuse with impunity in Africa.[58] In one form or another, incidences of electoral violence, electoral intimidation, electoral fraud, and communal feuds stemming from elections are deeply rooted in Africa.[59]

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Notes

1 Lührmann et al. 2018, p. 1322.
2 V-Dem 2020.
3 Although this definition emanates from me, I derived the inspiration from Lührmann et al.'s work on the *State of the world 2017: Autocratization and exclusion?* published in 2018.
4 The major areas of interference are in their administrative and financial activities of government institutions. Cf. Mbah and Obiagu 2020.+
5 Mbah and Obiagu 2020.

6 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019a publication that exempted Africa from the autocratization narrative and V-Dem 2020 report that included the continent in the narrative.

7 Birch, Daxecker and Höglund 2020, p. 5.

8 Birch, Daxecker and Höglund 2020.

9 Slovik 2012, p. 20.

10 Brooker 2014, p. 1.

11 Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2014, p. 317.

12 Cassani and Tomini 2018.

13 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019a, p. 1096.

14 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019a.

15 EIU 2020, 2017.

16 Bermeo 2016.

17 Diamond 2008.

18 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019a.

19 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019a.

20 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019a.

21 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019a, p. 1095.

22 Democracy Digest 2019, p. 2.

23 Democracy Digest 2019, p. 2.

24 These elements are articulated from scholarly works of Dahl 1971; Diamond 1996; Freedom House 2020; V-Dem 2020.

25 Daxecker 2014.

26 Freedom House 2020.

27 Burchard 2015.

28 Höglund 2009.

29 Straus and Taylor 2012.

30 Collier and Vincente 2012.

31 Taylor 2018.

32 Birch, Daxecker and Höglund 2020, p. 3.

33 Birch, Daxecker and Höglund 2020, p. 4.

34 Straus and Taylor 2012.

35 Birch, Daxecker and Höglund 2020.

36 Birch, Daxecker and Höglund 2020.

37 Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas 2020.

38 Bekoe 2010, pp. 2-3.

39 Birch, Daxecker and Höglund 2020.

40 Bekoe 2010.

41 Logan, Fujiwara and Parish 2006, p. 12.

42 Almost a decade later, a similar empirical study was conducted by Fjelde and Höglund (2014: 297) and the study showed that Mozambique, Namibia, and Zambia recently experienced largely peaceful elections; while widespread electoral violence by both government and opposition actors marred recent elections in Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe.

43 Kishi et al. 2020, pp. 13-14.

44 Kishi et al. 2020.

45 Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas 2020.
46 Gutiérrez-Romero and LeBas 2020, p. 90.
47 United Nations Development Programme 2016.
48 Goldsmith 2015.
49 For these cases of irregularity, see Idakwoji, Paul and Alih 2018.
50 Corrales 2020.
51 For Lührmann and Lindberg (2019b), autocratization episodes are connected periods of time with a substantial decline in democratic regime traits.
52 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019a, p. 1095.
53 Lührmann and Lindberg 2019b.
54 V-Dem 2020.
55 V-Dem 2019, p. 52.
56 V-Dem 2020, p. 26.
57 Freedom House 1990, pp. 6-7.
58 Annan 2016.
59 Cf. Goldsmith 2015.