

Democracy and the Paradox of Zimbabwe: Lessons from Traditional Systems of Governance

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Abstract

Traditional systems of governance are so outrageous that mulling over them today may seem like flogging a dead horse. In this paper however, it will be argued that; democracy, good governance, peace and development, if ever they are to be achieved in Zimbabwe, there is need to look at the socio-political and economic order of traditional Zimbabwean societies instead of relying on borrowed liberal democratic principles that have been a bag of mixed blessings to Zimbabwe's post independence era. First, the paper examines the concept democracy as it is theoretically and practically understood and practiced in Zimbabwe today. Second, it argues against the philosophy of liberalism which is one of the cornerstones of democracy.

In this regard, it argues that liberal democratic principles are incompatible and inconsistent with Zimbabwe's political mores and history in general. Lastly, as a solution to the current democratic vacuum characterizing Zimbabwe, the paper argues that there is need to revisit Zimbabwe's traditional systems of governance and see what can be taken thereof. It will be established that non-party consensual democracy is a sine qua non option for Zimbabwe if ever democracy, good governance and development are to be achieved. By and large, the thesis developed in this paper is that viable adaptation and adoption of a non party consensual democracy could see Zimbabwe out of its current democratic paradox.

Introduction

The post independent experiences under the umbrella of liberal democracy have not been a bed of roses for post colonial Zimbabwe and Africa at large. It is the position of this paper that, if Zimbabwe is to escape its current socio-political and economic problems, and above all, its democratic vacuum, there is need to revisit traditional Zimbabwean and African systems of governance like the non-party consensual democracy. Chemhuru (2004) noted the possibility of transforming and becoming accustomed to the African democratic heritage as the only solution that could help Africa's multi-cultural societies to escape current forms of democracy, which generally are flawed. Following this argument, it is the contention of the writer that rather than relying on modern liberal democratic principles that have in actual fact bred outcries against autocracy, election violence and election rigging, as well as hate and acrimony among political leaders, politicians and the people in general, the paper advocates for a return to the past which is commonly viewed as an anachronism in solving current socio-political and economic problems. As Wamba-dia-Wamba (1992:32) sees it, as Africans "we must move away from the process of *moving away from* traditional society *and* internalizing the colonial state." In this regard, shunning traditional systems of governance at the expense of liberal democratic principles may not be the best route to be followed out of Zimbabwe's current democratic paradox.

Firstly, the paper explores the concept of democracy from both a historical, phenomenological and hermeneutical approaches. In that light, it traces the historical and etymological origin of the term democracy, and proceeds to situate it within the context of how it is perceived and practiced in Zimbabwe currently. The attempt is to come up with a working understanding of the concept democracy, such that the logical geography of the concept can be mapped out, especially as liberal democracy has been understood and practiced in the Zimbabwean context.

Second, the paper examines the feasibility of the major tenets of democracy with the Zimbabwean and African value-system at large, especially in the light of the philosophy of liberalism vis-à-vis communitarian approach to life in Zimbabwe. The argument proffered here is that generally, the philosophy of liberalism is alien to the Zimbabwean social, political and economic way of living.

The clash among values of freedom or liberty, order and equality (which are part of the liberal democratic schema) with the Zimbabwean political value system is examined in this section. Here, it is established that, the view that liberal democratic principles are the answer to Zimbabwe's socio-political problems is fundamentally flawed.

Thirdly, the paper argues that although it is hard to imagine a reasonable justification for a defence of traditional systems of governance in modern African nation states like Zimbabwe, that are clamouring for a place within the global village, still, consensus remains one of the most important political tools that could be used in the building of democratic gaps and cracks that have been created in Zimbabwe's post independent period, especially after 2000 to the present. Hence, it is reasonable to take the argument by Chemhuru (2004:02) that "Africa's political salvation, if ever it is to be realized, will be enhanced by consensual democracy in a non-party environment." This thesis is based mainly on the existential realities of the political and democratic predicament unfolding in Zimbabwe in the post independent era under the pretext of liberal democratic values.

Thus, the thesis of the paper is that, unlike the system of multi party democratic elections that is mainly based on liberal democratic values, that have fanned election violence, choruses of disapproval of free elections (see BBC News, 2003: 03 November), conflicts and hate amongst people holding on to different and diverse political opinions in the post independence period in Zimbabwe, non-party consensual democracy, which is a traditional system of governance remains one of the panaceas to such challenges as it enhances social interaction as seen by the Ghanaian philosopher Kwasi Wiredu (1996:182) who argued that "where consensus characterises political decision-making in Africa, it is a manifestation of an approach to social interaction." Hence, the argument of this paper that non-party consensual democracy, which was a viable system of governance in most African traditional societies could best help Zimbabwe out of its pseudo democratic paradox. In brief, this work is a culmination of the inspiration from the Philosophical works of Professor Kwasi Wiredu.

Understanding Democracy

The word democracy means different things to different people. It is one word that over time and history has changed meaning more than once and in more than one direction. It is important perhaps to have an appreciation and meaning of the concept democracy, before any serious attempt to examine its experiences within the Zimbabwean context. Democracy seems to have been a heavily contested concept in Zimbabwe. There are different diverging notions of the concept and how it should be cherished and practiced among different individuals, social, political, economic and other institutions in Zimbabwe. At the same time, it is one form of governance that most politicians, including despots the world over purport to be exercising or always aspire for.

In ancient Greek states like Athens, democracy was a practice through which only male citizens (i.e. excluding women, children, slaves and foreigners) could meet, discuss and deliberate on matters affecting humanity. Seen in this light, democracy seems a very complex term. Hence, there is need to understand it clearly, otherwise if democracy is not properly defined and understood, McGowan (1991:21) noted that people would live in an extricable confusion of ideas, much to the advantage of demagogues and despots.

From its Greek etymological meaning, ‘rule by the people’ *democratia* [*demos=people; cratos=rule*], democracy seems simple and easy to understand. In his Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln defined democracy as simply a government of the people, by the people and for the people. Thus, today the world over, democracy is almost universally recommended to cascade everywhere in contemporary social, political and economic contracts among others because of the understanding that it is a good form of governance. As Ouwaseyi (2009:14) sees it, “it is evident that the most popular form of government today in the world is democracy, judging by its wide acceptance and pretensions to it by those who in reality are disinclined to its tenets. The reason for this lies in the fact that being democratic today now signifies being good and admissible into the committee of nations as opposed to the isolation meted out to regimes considered to be despotic.”

Although democracy appears to be a universally recommended system of governance in the world today, still, it remains one of the heavily contested concepts in Africa, particularly Zimbabwe. In his speech on the 15th of September 2008’s official signing ceremony of the Memorandum of Understanding between Z.A.N.U P.F and the two M.D.C formations, Robert Mugabe (2008), one of the main political players in post independence Zimbabwe’s political field echoed the sentiment that ‘*democracy is a very different proposition*’ for not only Zimbabwe, but the whole of the African continent. He implied that sometimes, certain principles of liberal democracy may not be compatible with the African value system. For Falaiye (1998: 97), one fundamental problem created by the elastic use of the concept of democracy is the problem of definition. It is quite complex because of its practical implications upon given social contracts as Mugabe (ibid) implies.

Democracy seems a multi-pronged concept that its practice and promotion may sometimes be relative across different nation states. Concept such as freedom, order, human rights and equality among others are part of the democratic agenda and discourse such that it has been very easier said than done to universally value these across the world. According to Janda *et al* (2001:05), “most governments at least claim to preserve individual freedom, while they maintain order, although they vary widely in the extent to which they succeed. Few governments even profess to guarantee equality, and governments differ greatly in policies that pit equality against freedom.” Against this background thus, this is the reason why sometimes the application of the ideals of democracy may be relative depending on the nature of the institution’s social contract, especially its constitution.

According to Adediran (1996:47) “the promotion, practice and vicissitudes of democracy in different parts of the world have exposed it to some definitional haze and diverse forms of interpretation.” Perhaps, this is the reason why Hardin (1990:185) thinks that democracy may not necessarily be limited to majority rule. (See also Macpherson, 1966). This is the same quandary with which democracy has faced in Zimbabwe in the post independence era. Whilst some Zimbabwean politicians for example Mugabe would boast of having promoted democracy, freedom, equality, justice and majority rule among others in the Zimbabwean post independent period, on the other extreme, there is also an out-cry from champions of western liberal democracy for the need to cherish the virtues of democracy like human rights, equality, justice and good governance among other political virtues that should be intrinsically worthy and binding to all nations and peoples of the world, regardless of race, colour or language. Hence the need to revisit the concept of democracy in Zimbabwe so as to argue for a non-party consensual democracy becomes a valuable exercise.

Liberalism versus Communitarianism

The idea of democracy thus, is quite complex and contested as are its justifications and practical implications in Zimbabwe as shall be seen shortly. As Macpherson (1996: 01) rightly argues “democracy used to be a bad word. Everybody who was anybody knew that democracy in its original sense of the rule by the people or government in accordance with the will of the bulk of the people would be a bad thing, fatal to individual freedom and all graces of civilized living.” The idea here is that from its Lincolian understanding as a rule by the people, which is normally the majority, already, it can be observed that democracy in actual essence is not compatible with the will of all the people. Democracy is sometimes an injury to individual liberties of both the minority and the majority as well. Here, the idea is that democratic principles are rooted in the philosophy of liberalism such that almost always it is very difficult for it to fit well in societies that are inherently communitarian like Zimbabwe. In general, the question of feasibility is also an obstacle to the democratization of Zimbabwe and Africa at large hence the need to revisit certain social, cultural as well as economic factors that characterized traditional Zimbabwean societies, contrary to pessimists like Huntington (1968); Akindes (1996: 178-9); Huntington and Nelson (1997:114) and Gordon (1997:153) who are all of the thinking that cultural as well as economic and social factors are obstacles to the democratization process in Africa.

There is no consensus on whether democracy is compatible with the Zimbabwean or even African experiences in general. While it is commonly viewed as a precondition for Africa’s development, Wamba-dia-Wamba (1994: 03) challenges us to consider the question of whether democracy can be considered as *African* or as alien to Africa. Thus, skepticism still characterizes the aspect of democracy in the light of its compatibility with Zimbabwean and African values at large, especially in the light of the philosophy of liberalism, which is one of the cornerstones of democracy.

Normally, individual freedom; expressed through other liberties like that of expression, speech, movement, association, equality, justice and the promotion of individual human rights among others are considered to be the pillars of a viable system of liberal democracy. However, an analysis of the metaphysical constitution of the Zimbabwean and African society at large proves that it may be very difficult to cultivate all these virtues of democracy without compromising on the Zimbabwean and African socio-political value system. For example, this is the reason why it has been and still is very difficult to make African constitutions to accept practices like abortion, homosexuality, and pornography (sexually explicit movies) among others that are considered permissible among several liberal democracies the world over.

By and large, the Zimbabwean and other African societies at large give ontological priority to society, and not the individual, hence it may be very difficult, if not impossible to instill free-thinking, open-mindedness and sometimes a culture of tolerance as virtues of freedom that is enshrined in democracy. Rather, viewed that way, such democracy tends to be atomistic in terms of it promoting the welfare of the individual at the expense of the society. This is contrary to the African understanding of the individual as seen by Mbiti.(1969:106), as he argued that , for Africans, “whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say: *I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.* This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man.”

This understanding of society emanates from the African communitarian view of the human person where an individual person’s action can only be understood in the context of an intertwine of other factors from his community. (See Menkiti 2006, and 1984:172). In other words, democracy, or liberal democracy, as we know it today is not compatible with the Zimbabwean and even African way of life. For traditional Zimbabwean and African societies, the individual person’s ontological status could only be understood by reference to the community. As Ramose (1999:154) sees it, “neither the individual nor the community can define and pursue their respective purposes without recognizing their mutual foundedness and their complementarity.” Viewed this way, thus, the promotion of individual liberties that is fostered by the notion of liberal democracy may not be necessary for the Zimbabwean and the African at large since being such presupposes that the community will safeguard such liberty on behalf of the individual. In other words, liberty amongst Zimbabweans and Africans at large may not necessarily be for the individual, but, rather for the whole community. The Zimbabwean and African communities at large give the priority of liberty to the whole society at the expense of the individual person. It is, therefore, apparent that the Zimbabwean and African political value system strongly contradicts with the idea of liberal democracy and the philosophy of liberalism general.

Looking the contentious question of human rights for example, in Zimbabwe and probably other African nation states, it becomes apparent that human rights do not necessarily exist for the individual human person. Rather, rights do exist for the whole of the community and not the individual human person. Situating human rights in the African worldview, it becomes evident that the western conception of individual human rights ownership is rather individualistic and atomic and not communalistic. As Zvobgo (1979:93) sees it, "Rights . . . do not exist as an integral part of human nature. They arise from a person's destiny of living in a relationship with family, friends, ethno-linguistic groups and nation. They are incidental, unavoidable and necessary, but not an attribute of being human. No rights can be exercised apart from one's relationship with another." This, this understanding of human rights does not necessarily sink with the way rights are understood from a liberal western perspective where a right is seen by Wiredu (1996:157) as a claim that an individual is entitled to make simply by virtue of their status as human beings.

Non-Party Consensual Democracy: Lessons from the Past.

Although Wiredu (1996), admitted that it is hard to imagine grounds that are fertile for the breeding of traditional systems of governance in modern African nation states [like Zimbabwe], that are clamouring for a place within the global village, still, consensus remains one of the most important political panaceas that could be used in the building of democratic gaps and cracks that have been created in the post independent Zimbabwe.

The concept of democracy is heavily rooted in the politics of liberalism which is alien to; not only Zimbabwe's politico-existential experiences, but it is also eccentric to the conception of the human person that is found in Africa where the individual *being* is always seen from a communitarian perspective, rather than the individually existing ontological being with only *reason*, *will* and *desire*. However, this is not an argument for anachronism. Neither is it an attack of liberal democracy merely on the grounds that it is alien to African communities. See Hinden (1963:03) and Legum (1986:177-9). Rather non-party consensual democracy deserves a try in Zimbabwe's political field given its compatibility with its socio-political background, culture and history given the fact that most traditional Zimbabwean and African societies are basically communitarian in nature, (See Mbiti: 1969) and Menkiti, I.A, (2006), and that decision making in these societies is by consensus. (Wiredu: 1996).

Non-party consensual democracy has been used in African traditional societies and with much success. In essence, democracy, but in a non-party environment is not a new phenomenon to Africa. As Ilinga-Kobongo (1986: 35) observed, "democracy is not intrinsically alien to African people or [un]African and i[n] many traditional systems in Africa, it was the political principle around which life evolved." Basically, decisions in traditional African societies were based on agreement between parties. According to Serge and Doise (1994: 01) consensus is "when people seek to associate together, act in consent and make decisions."

This definition implies that consensus is primarily formed on the idea of parties agreeing to certain ideas on certain fundamental issues. As a possible system of governance for Zimbabwe, non-party consensual democracy has the unique quality of being able to help to put to an end to disagreements emanating from which party wins the election and which party loses the election which has always been the bone of contention in Zimbabwe since 2000. Political parties in modern democracies, especially Zimbabwe seem to be bent on gaining and maintaining power only. Such a conception of politics has from experience produced self styled *Machiavellians* who solely view politics as a game of power. As Moyo (1992: 312) sees it, “the political party in Africa is an instrument of power and domination.” Thus, rather than focusing on who wins the election at the end of the day, in a non-party environment, consensus can best help the Zimbabwean politicians to focus more on fundamental issues that are crucial to human well-being and development.

Consensus, as a basis for a non-party consensual democracy, explores various conflicting viewpoints and possibilities, focuses them and directs them towards an entente that all parties acknowledge. As Wiredu (1996) sees it, consensus is a form of agreement and compromise, and compromise is a streamline of individuals’ interests in order that something common and important may be done instead. Viewed this way, thus, consensus need not be seen as just a demand for conformity. Rather, there is more to consensus than conformity.

Although the traditional systems of kinship that provided the mainstay for consensus no longer exist as argued for by Wiredu (1996), still, consensus is very important for modern African societies, especially Zimbabwe that has in the post independent era, especially the period 2000 to 2009 been torn apart as a result of liberal democratic principles resulting into, recurrent political conflicts and hate between ZANU PF and MDC, which have been the main rival parties in this period. Even though consensus may appear on the surface to be outmoded and no longer viable today, at least the aspect of dialogue that it is based on may go a long way towards reconciling divergent political views from people of different political divides.

In principle, consensus as a solution to the problems posed by liberal democratic principles seems to be the only way out of the Zimbabwean democratic paradox. Non-party consensual democracy is not only democratic in nature, but it also guarantees the participation of every individual in almost all political decisions since it is discussion oriented. As Bingu wa Mutharika (1995: 09) sees it, “an important aspect of political accountability which the African traditional society has handed down from generation to generation is the sanctity of dialogue.” For example, in Zimbabwe recently, some of the gains of consensual decision making are the talks leading to the government of national unity between the three political parties, MDC, MDC-T and ZANU PF, although in the Zimbabwean situation, it is not yet strictly speaking, a non-party consensual democracy that the paper is advocating for. But however, through consensual agreement to work together have the three political parties decided to work together towards solving social, political and economic problems characterising Zimbabwe in the post 2000 era.

Consensus solves the problem created by the majoritarian principle of liberal democracy, where there is a problem in reconciling the majority with the minority that can also be a majority in its own right as argued for earlier in an analysis of the elections held in Zimbabwe between 2000 and 2008. Thus, seen in this light, non-party consensual democracy in Zimbabwe would guarantee political participation of the minority since it is discussion oriented. Besides political participation being guaranteed on the minorities, non-party consensual democracy also solves the modern controversial issue of human rights which must always be guaranteed in any modern political society. Human rights, under consensus are taken into cognizance, especially the rights of the minority that are undermined in a system of majoritarian liberal democracy. In comparing majority rule with consensus in traditional African societies, Wiredu (1996:163) noted that “all decisions of the council were based on consensus. The elders would keep on discussing an issue till consensus was reached, a method that contrast with the decision by majority vote that prevails in modern democracies. The rationale of decision by consensus as can be inferred was to forestall the trivialization of the right of the minority to have an effect on decision.” Thus, non-party consensual democracy is important in putting the rights of all to the fore, unlike in modern liberal democracy where the rights of the many dominate those of the few.

However, with consensus, the fact that people have got different and diverging views in terms of political ideologies should not be overlooked. It is almost inevitable that disagreements, differences and diverging social and political opinions will almost always arise within societies, like the differences in ideological subscription that we witness in Zimbabwe between people belonging to different political organizations. Consensus does not always imply agreement on all issues, but compromise among different parties who at the end of the day agree or reconcile, knowing fully that their points of view have been taken seriously.

As Eze (1997: 315) sees it, every party is a government party and the principle of governance should be the reconciliation of competing social interests. Rather, reconciliation, agreement, consensus and not the rule of the majority should make up the political axiom. In the Zimbabwean context for example, although there may be different diverging political ideologies between politicians and legislators in parties that currently constitute the government, at least, almost always, decisions are based on consensual agreement on thorny issues. According to Wiredu, (1996: 303) consensus was taken as a basis of joint action and was taken axiomatically. Of course people differ, but consensus in a non-party system of governance seems to be the only way out if Zimbabwe is to see her salvation out of its current democratic paradox. At the same time, it is important to look at the possibility for a non-party consensual democracy, but having at the back of the mind, the argument by Ramose (1999:130), that it may be “simply wishful thinking to pretend that contemporary Africa can just ignore this alien cultural experience and proceed with the search for an emancipative epistemological paradigm.” Thus, the need to escape liberal democratic principles may not be an easy task for the modern African state like Zimbabwe, but that may not mean that it is the best that Zimbabwe can have as a system of governance.

Conclusion

In this paper, it has been argued that; democracy, good governance, peace and development, if ever are to be achieved in Zimbabwe, there is need to re-examine the social order of traditional Zimbabwean societies instead of relying on borrowed liberal democratic principles like the majoritarian liberal principles of democracy. It argued for the position that the philosophy of liberalism is not compatible with the African democratic experiences. Thus, as a solution to the current democratic vacuum characterizing Zimbabwe, it has been established that non-party consensual democracy is a viable option for Zimbabwe's political salvation.

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