

# AMERICA'S FOREIGN POLICY AND THE CHALLENGES OF LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

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## Abstract

*The paper examines the United States of America's foreign policy toward Africa in terms of promoting liberal democracy, as well as the challenges that African countries face in putting liberal democracy principles into practice, thereby impeding expected dividends and development. It is based on secondary data sources and descriptive data analysis methods. The findings revealed a gap between what the United States proposed for Africa in terms of good governance, anti-corruption, and social development and how liberal democracy actually works on the continent. The paper observed that, despite America's celebration of liberal democracy, the effect in Africa is contextualized by the majority of African countries' experiences of impressive governance, ineffective leadership, and endemic corruption. The various bilateral agreements between the United States of America and some African countries to promote liberal democracy have also been called into question due to deviations from expected outcomes. The paper suggests a philosophical approach to liberal democracy in Africa that incorporates pre-colonial African leadership traditions and governance cultures. African governments should invest adequately in youths and galvanize their energies for productivity through employment opportunities in order to uphold and protect liberal democracy. On the other hand, the United States should strengthen bilateral relations with each African country to ensure that they achieve good governance and economic development for mutual benefit.*

**Keywords:** Africa, United States of America, economic development, governance, leadership, underdevelopment

## Introduction

Scholars of international relations and diplomacy have observed that over the last quarter-century, a large number of nations have successfully transitioned to democracy. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) that scores each of the world's countries in five distinct categories, including: (i) a pluralistic system in which at least two legitimate-but-different political

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parties coexist; (ii) a free and fair electoral process that enables the people to choose between candidates from those parties; (iii) a government that operates openly and transparently, works for the good of all the people, respects its own rules, has proper checks and balances, and gives its citizens free choice and control over their lives, politically engaged citizens who support democratic principles, “fight fair”, vote regularly, accept the will of the voters, and commit to a peaceful transfer of power after each election; (iv) emphasis on preserving civil liberties and personal freedoms of both the majority and minorities; (v) a free and independent media unhindered by government interference, influence, or intimidation; observed that apart from South Africa, there is no country in Africa that has met the benchmark of growing democracy (EIU Democracy Index, 2012). Furthermore, the Economist Intelligence Unit’s (EUI) Democracy Index (2012) benchmarks to measure liberal democracy values such as electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; government functioning; political participation; and political culture have not seen significant improvement in democratic governance and practice in African practice. According to the World Population Review (2022) democracy countries in Africa either operates hybrid democracy or authoritarian democracy with the exception of South Africa that is still categorized as an average or flawed democracy. Globally, liberal democracy has grown from 30 countries in 1974 to 117 today ([www.uscis.gov](http://www.uscis.gov)). Liberal democracy is concerned with the alliance, merging, and union of electoral processes, civil liberties, government functioning, political participation, and political culture with the system governance in such a way that the process of consolidation leads to the promotion, upgrading, and expansion of free and fair national elections, voter security, the influence of foreign powers on government, and the ability of civil servants to implement policies (EIU Democracy Index, 2010).

However, liberal democracy is facing challenges in Africa, leading to the emergence of illiberal democracy in the majority of African countries. When citizens are disconnected from government activities, have no say in the political system, and are denied the role that civil liberties are supposed to play, such countries have the structure of an illiberal democracy (Nyyssonen & Jussi, 2020). Notably, elections in an illiberal democracy are frequently manipulated or rigged, with the goal of legitimizing and consolidating the incumbent rather than choosing the country’s leaders and policies. This type of democracy is known as electoral authoritarianism, competitive authoritarianism, or soft authoritarianism (Schedler, 2006).

Ironically, American foreign policy, though, aimed at promoting and expanding liberal democracy in Africa, but the outcome may be leading to the experience of illiberal democracy. The mere notion of American foreign policy that democracy occurs when all of a country's citizens have the fundamental right to choose those who govern them through a civil process that includes free, fair, and transparent elections has been challenged in Africa by the elite's skillful manipulation of the electoral process to the point where citizens have little or no choice in determining the outcome of the elections. The United States foreign policy makers and actors tend to feel satisfy with the believe that they have done well enough in strengthening the political institutions, help African countries to address governance challenges, promote an active civil society, and uphold human rights (state.gov), it has become difficult over the years to ascertain the root cause of expansion of illiberal democracy in Africa despite the assistance offered by the United States towards democratic consolidation in Africa. This is the problem of this study.

This paper investigates American foreign policy toward the promotion of liberal democracy in Africa, as well as the failure of the foreign policy to achieve desired results despite the United States' perceived commitment to good governance and democracy in African countries. It investigates the causes of illiberal democracy in some African countries and proposes solutions to the challenges.

## **Concept of Liberal Democracy**

Liberal democracy is commonly understood to be a form of government in which people consent to their rulers and rulers are legally bound to respect individual rights. Bell (2009) identified three main hallmarks of liberal democracy-human rights, democracy, and capitalism to question its existence in some countries. Generally, liberal democracy is a liberal political ideology and a form of government in which representative democracy operates on classical liberalism's principles, that includes; elections between multiple distinct political parties, a separation of powers into different branches of government, the rule of law in everyday life as part of an open society, a market economy with private property, and equal protection of human rights, civil liberties, and political freedoms for all people (Russell, 1999). Macpherson (1977) stressed the essence of liberal democracy and how it can be reimaged.

## The American Foreign Policy's Focus on Africa

When President Joe Biden of the United States delivered his first international speech as U.S. President in February 2021, he affirmed support for multilateralism, diplomacy, and human dignity. Biden's first foreign policy action was on rehabilitation of America's global reputation. The President chose to first address the African Union (AU) Summit before any other, thereby raising the hope of shift in American foreign policy toward Africa (Rattner & Whitmore, 2021).

The United States has always acknowledged that Africa's liberal democracy will be hampered as long as deadly conflicts divide societies, corruption stifles economic progress, food insecurity increases the risk of famine and malnutrition, and repression hampers human rights and democratic expression (White House, 2022). Biden's foreign policy towards Africa seeks to foster openness and open societies by promoting government transparency and accountability, increasing a focus on rule of law, justice, and dignity, and assisting African countries to more transparently leverage natural resources for sustainable development. Secondly, the administration seeks to deliver democratic and security dividends by working with allies and regional partners to curtail authoritarianism and military takeovers in Africa by supporting civil society, empowering marginalized groups, centering the voices of women and youth, and defending free and fair elections, improving African partners' capacity to advance regional stability and security, and reducing the threat posed by terrorist groups to the U.S. homeland, persons, and diplomats. Thirdly, it seeks to promote African economic opportunity by promoting growth trajectory and debt sustainability (USAID, 2022). The U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, also emphasized promotion of democracy and human rights in Africa (Usman, 2021).

### Literature Review

During classical antiquity, the term "democracy" first appeared in ancient Greek political and philosophical thought in the city-state of Athens, while the Athenians discovered it in 508-507 BC. Cleisthenes is referred to as the father of Athenian Democracy (Toppr, 2022). The term "democracy" is derived from the Greek words' demos (common people) and kratos (strength). Generally conceptualized, democracy is a government system in which citizens directly exercise power or elect representatives from among themselves to form a governing body, such as a parliament. It is also known as "majority rule." In a democracy, power cannot be inherited,

people vote for their leaders and representatives run in elections, while citizens vote for their preferred candidate. The representative who receives the most votes is elected (Toppr, 2022).

Scholars and intellectuals all over the world have discussed and debated the challenges of liberal democracy. According to Weidenfeld (2020), all democracies face external as well as internal challenges. There is no country or region of the world where perfect liberal democracy is ordained. Galston (2018) observed that liberal democracy is fragile, under constant threat, and in constant need of repair. But liberal democracy is also strong because, more than any other political form, it has the ability to self-correct. However, Weidenfeld (2020) identified cultural erosion as one of the factors that caused liberal democracy to become fragile. This factor has caused “trust to erode, distrust to grow, and alienation to dominate” in democratic countries across Europe, the Americas, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Another issue central to liberal democracy is the emergence of structural challenges related to globalization, internationalization, cyber-development, and digitalization, which have resulted in a more complex era for liberal democracy. These issues, when combined, result in what Weidenfeld (2020) described as “liberal democracy passing through an era of complexity and confusion”.

Democracy is a culture that required development in schools and educational frameworks, universities, mass media, and social sciences. Developing a democratic culture wherever power decisions are made at the village, national, and international levels is necessary; as well as developing a common democratic perspective, and a practical strategy very important (Weidenfeld, 2020). When these are observed, liberal democratic institutions not only help to protect citizens from tyrannical concentrations of power, but they also provide mechanisms for turning public grievances and unmet needs into effective reforms. These mechanisms do not operate on their own; they require committed leaders with clear objectives (Galston, 2018). Toppr (2022) argued that many democratic countries’ political leaders and officers are corrupt, dishonest, and inefficient. They demand bribes, making citizens distrustful of them. This has constituted negative impact on the country’s democratic functioning.

Also identified as a challenge is the role of anti-social elements arises during the elections. Many people are coerced or bribed into voting for a specific candidate or party and election rigging is also practiced. Added is socioeconomic inequalities among the people. Despite the fact that all citizens have the right to vote and run-in elections, only the wealthy have a

chance of winning. Closely related to the challenges is the issue of religion, ethnicity and region. During elections, a large number of voters consider the candidate's religion, ethnicity and region. When distributing election tickets, political parties consider a person's religion, ethnicity or region, and in most cases, representatives elected solely on the basis of religion or ethnicity work for the benefit of those who only belong to their religion or region or ethnicity (Toppr, 2022). This supported Enzo (2007) assertion that linked the challenge of liberal democracy to ethnic diversity in the work, "Liberal Democracy and the Challenge of Ethical Diversity."

Gromadzki and Wenerski (2014) conduct an empirical investigation into the challenges to liberal democracy. The researchers argued in their paper, "A challenge for liberal democracy: How to Understand Russia's Intervention in Ukraine," that authoritarian governments outside democratic countries are working against liberal democracy. According to Gromadzki and Wenerski (2014), Russia's intervention in Ukraine should be viewed as a manifestation of the rivalry between liberal democracy and modern authoritarianism.

## Methods

Secondary data, a qualitative methodology, and descriptive data analysis techniques are used in this paper. The paper gathered useful information from peer-reviewed journals, textbooks and websites of relevant institutions connected with the subject.

## African Liberal Democracy's Challenges

The revolt against liberal democracy (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018) in Africa is manifested not through protests against democratic institutions, but through persistent deviation from liberal democratic values. Despite the United States' foreign policy of promoting liberal democracy in Africa, many studies have found that the African continent is the world's slowest growing region (Campbell & Quinn, 2021). According to Selassie and Hakobyan (2021), the growing gap between Africa and the rest of the world makes liberal democracy unappealing to Africans. The real GDP per capita-based income disparity between Africa and the rest of the world, which is expected to widen further, poses challenges to the continent's liberal democracy (Selassie & Hakobyan, 2021).

The countries of Africa have experienced resource mobilization challenges, hindering opportunities in liberal democracy. For instance, Nigeria is

perceived to struggle with insufficient infrastructure, slow legislative reforms, an ineffective property registration system, trade restrictions, an inconsistent regulatory environment, a slow and ineffective judicial system, unreliable dispute resolution procedures, insecurity, and pervasive corruption (African Growth and Opportunity Act Newsletter, 2022). The economy of the Benin Republic is still underdeveloped and is reliant on local trade, cotton farming, and subsistence farming under liberal democracy. Liberia, a liberal democracy, has remained a low-income nation that mainly depends on aid from other countries and remittances from its diaspora. Much of Liberia's economy, particularly the infrastructure in and around the capital, was damaged in the 1990s and early 2000s by civil conflict and government mismanagement. Mali has emerged as one of the poorest nations in the world.

The main challenge of liberal democracy in Africa is the disconnect of its practice from African principles. African philosophy emphasized spirituality which prescribed necessary spiritual or inner maturity to be able to handle the pressure and requirements of leadership position or authority. However, western liberal democracy as presented to Africa is deficient in promoting morality among the African leaders, since it values materialism than spirituality. According to Lipset (1983) (cited by Aderibigbe & Onyibor, 2007) the more prosperous a country is, the more likely it is to maintain democracy. However, only the few elites and authoritarians are prosperous under liberal democracy in Africa.

Aside from the lack of emphasis on spirituality in liberal democracy within the context of African philosophy, Mbandlwa (2020) attributes the decline to African leadership challenges. In Africa, ineffective leadership influences corruption, fraud, underdeveloped infrastructure, poor performance, and unsustainable development. Underdevelopment in Africa is primarily caused by the type of leaders who are elected to positions of leadership. Leaders elected in African countries after independence are wealthy, as are their families and friends (Mbandlwa, 2020) while their subjects are subjected to poverty. Poncian and Mgaya (2022) observed that bad leadership and bad governance as the twin factors that hindered the dividends of liberal democracy in Africa. According to Adeyemi (2017) incompetence in leadership in most African countries is not only the problem of people who occupy positions in government but a reflection of the leadership culture. Duke and Nwagboso (2012) agree that inept and corrupt leadership have over the years, adversely affected the development of the Africa countries.

Another threat to African liberal democracy is endemic corruption, which has ravaged the African political and economic systems. Gök (2021) points to self-reinforcing corruption, strategic complementarity, past corruption levels as an important predictor of Africa corruption levels and the gap between more and less corrupt countries remains constant as more corrupt countries become more corrupt and less corrupt countries become less corrupt. With a few exceptions, Africans, according to Campbell and Quinn (2021), will become increasingly alienated from those claiming to represent them as governments across the continent become more authoritarian. Political instability led to violent outbreaks, as seen in Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Nigeria, according to Campbell and Quinn.

As elites vie for power and citizens resist oppressive regimes, social and economic development will be hampered, to the detriment of the continent's rapidly growing population. These forces also drive internal displacement and outward migration, both to other African countries and to Europe. Addressing these issues will necessitate dealing with long-standing grievances that are often exacerbated by the poor, sometimes brutal governance that is all too common across the African continent (Campbell & Quinn, 2021).

## Discussion

Power, resources, identity, ideas, and values are all complex and interconnected factors of political conflict that impede the development of many civilizations (Sodaro, 2007), including Africa. Despite being a diverse continent with the ability to generate equitable progress and eradicate poverty, Africa, has been unable to achieve the laudable goals of liberal democracy due to some factors inherent in the weakness of liberal democracy itself and embedded in Africa manner of practicing liberal democracy. Recent experiences have demonstrated the inability of liberal industrialized countries such as the United States of America to assist African leaders in delivering the African citizens from the shackle of poverty and illiberal democracy. The high rate of unemployment and underemployment among young Africans and women, as well as the threat to social cohesion and inclusive development, demonstrate a lack of concern for the general welfare of the population by African leaders, posing challenges to American foreign policy toward Africa. As noted by the African Development Bank, a generation of Africans may be denied the opportunity to realize their full potential, overcome poverty, and contribute to the continent's trajectory of inclusive growth and economic change (AFDB, 2022).



Without questioning the current political culture of African leaders and citizens, insisting on colonialism and imperialism as current causes of Africa's underdevelopment (Rodney, 2020; Bhattacharyya, 2009; Ojo, 1999; Kutor, 2014) is critical and debatable. Many anti-democratic practices have become acceptable in Africa under the watch of African leaders, who still blame colonialism for the continent's problems. For example, Angola experienced its first leadership change in 38 years in August 2017. Angola's new President, Joo Lourenço, is believed to have inherited a country plagued by mismanagement and corruption, high unemployment, a lack of improvement in living conditions, and rising living costs while Mali democratization process is perpetually restarting, and the transition has demonstrated the failure of the Malian democratic system since August 18, 2020. Nigeria is widely known as good example of how poor leadership has stifled national development. According to statistics, Nigeria has lost more than \$400 billion to corruption since independence, ranking 154th out of 180 countries, with South Sudan ranking 180th (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; Vanguard Newspapers, (2012); Corruptions Perceptions Index 2021 for Nigeria, (2022). Although oil and gas sales account for over 90% of Nigeria's export earnings (Verrella, 2020), many Nigerian politicians own or hold stock in these oil companies, while tax revenues from the sector are deliberately reduced, and the benefits of Nigeria's wealth are not distributed evenly across the country. Election rigging by political parties is common, and corruption in government is widespread in Nigeria, where government appointments are dominated by business deals and family ties, allowing politicians, officials, and their business partners to form a tighter ruling elite and ensure that they all become wealthy through covert deals and the awarding of lucrative contracts to supporters (Ralby, 2017).

The U.S. government has provided these African countries with various forms of assistance in order to consolidate democracy and strengthen their economic foundations. For example, since 2011, the African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA) and Everything But Arms (EBA), two preferential treaties granted by the United States and the European Union, respectively, have established prospects for preferential access to major global markets (Coulibaly, 2017). The AGOA law was passed by the United States Congress in May 2000 with the goal of bolstering the economies of African regions. After its initial 15-year period of validity expired on June 29, 2015, the AGOA Act was extended for another ten years, to 2025. Non-oil product sectors of the African economy were expected to grow as a result of AGOA. Furthermore, In 2020, agreement

was made by the Dantiye Centre for Good Leadership and Journalism (DCL), the JS Centre for Governance and Security Policy Initiative (CGPSI), and the National Institute for Policy and Strategic Studies (NIPSS), Kuru, in Nigeria, for the advancement of cooperative politics and good governance in Africa, and to improve collaboration, mutual aid, training, strategic policy research, and advisory support in relation to local issues that will foster democracy (Nwafor, 2020). The agreement sought to address insurgency in the Sahel, which affects parts of Nigeria and a number of other countries in the region, political tensions, often related to elections, disagreements over trade and regional protocols, and significant climate change affecting the region's largely agrarian economies (Nwafor, 2020).

To halt the growing trend of illiberal democracy and authoritarianism in Africa, African philosophy that incorporates integrity, honesty, values, and norms into the fabric of liberal democracy in Africa is required. For sustainable development and the mitigation of problems such as corruption, bad governance, and insecurity, which have become inimical to the realization of liberal democracy's ideals, primordial African philosophy and strategy to good governance will be required.

## Conclusions

The paper noted that, while the United States of America has made concerted efforts to promote liberal democracy in Africa, there is still little evidence that liberal democracy benefits the majority of the population on the continent. The benefits of liberal democracy are enjoyed by a small number of African elites, while the majority of African masses are excluded from them. African leaders have not demonstrated a strong commitment to transforming the African continent. The rising level of corruption and poor governance in most African countries is detrimental to the realization of the principles and goals of liberal democracy. The paper also observed that, despite America's celebration of liberal democracy, the effect in Africa is contextualized by the majority of African countries' experiences with impressive governance, ineffective leadership, and endemic corruption. The various bilateral agreements between the United States of America and some African countries to promote liberal democracy have also been called into question due to deviations from expected outcomes.

As a result, the paper suggests a philosophical approach to liberal democracy in Africa that incorporates pre-colonial African leadership traditions and governance cultures. Integrating African tradition and culture into liberal

democracy will result in good governance, checks and balances, and a sense of responsibility toward African communities. In other words, the paper recommends the rebirth of African cultural values as an essential component of liberal democracy that works for the people. African leaders must ensure that the dividends of liberal democracy reach the masses so that Africans can appreciate the values of democracy. African governments should invest adequately in youths and galvanize their energies for productivity through employment opportunities in order to uphold and protect liberal democracy. Finally, the US and African governments should strengthen bilateral relations to ensure that African countries achieve good governance and economic development for mutual benefit.

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