

ABSTRACT

THE ABROGATION OF THE ELECTORATE: AN EMERGING AFRICAN PHENOMENON

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The collapse of the global bipolar order was trailed by a democratic wave in Africa in the 1990s, as authoritarian – military and one-party - regimes across the continent embarked on a frenetic transition to civil rule and/or multi-party democracy (Bratton, 1998; Adejumo, 2000; Brown, 2001; Golder and Wantchekon, 2004). However, in many cases, the new “democracy” was dominated by either the same martial and autocratic forces that had worked against plural democracy, or forces and elements aligned with them. Democratization thus became a means to an end for the postcolonial ruling elites, the end being the preservation of their political hegemony and economic privileges (Cf. O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986; Linz and Stepan, 1996). As a result, the ensuing “democratic” governments were more or less a continuation of (*civilianized*) military oligarchy and one party rule by other means. Although sanctity of the ballot is one of the most fundamental conditions of democracy, an “indispensable mechanism for determining democracy” (Wondwosen, 2008: 1), one of the key legacies of authoritarian rule in Africa has been the disinclination of the dominant classes to allow the choice of the electorate to prevail. For the most account, the methods that were used to impose autocratic rule on these countries have been adapted to the “democratic” context by the illiberal ruling classes in violation of the electoral sovereignty of the people. Why it has become more difficult, if not implausible, for anti-democratic forces to seize power through organized violence, the route taken to assume and consolidate power is often that of episodic violence involving the stealing of votes and/or manipulation of elections results. In many cases, this has been known to provoke counter-violence by members of the opposition and civil society, thus deepening the linkage between democratization and social violence and insecurity on the continent as a whole. Despite the fact that genuine democratic forces valorize the idea and ideal of the ballot box as an instrument for the validation of the people’s wish and mandate, the reality is that the box can function for anti-democratic forces in contemporary Africa as a means of disregarding and/or negating the choice and voice of the electorate.

What conceptual capital is to be gained from the contemporary reality in Africa where the electorate is more or less eviscerated through “elections”? What is democracy without the sanctity of the ballot? Does a system where there are no guarantees, over time, for the sanctity of the vote, qualify to be called a democracy? This paper attempts to capture an emerging African phenomenon in which the “letter” of democracy is brazenly used to invalidate its very spirit. We use four cases: Cameroon, Kenya, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe, to illustrate and encode the re-ascendance and re-invigoration of anti-democratic forces, and the challenge that violent violation of the electoral sovereignty of citizens constitutes to democratic theory and practice in contemporary Africa.

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