

RE-ASSESSING LIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT.

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Abstract

This paper examines whether external promotion of liberal democracy has advanced democratic consolidation and good governance in Africa or instead reinforced institutional fragility and limited social progress. Drawing on democratisation theory, postcolonial analysis, Afrobarometer data, and comparative case studies, it distinguishes between procedural reforms, especially elections, and substantive democratic outcomes such as accountability, inclusion, and effective public service delivery. The paper argues that externally driven democracy promotion has often produced illiberal and weakly consolidated regimes shaped by deep social, economic, and historical constraints. It concludes that democratic progress in Africa requires context-sensitive reforms, stronger institutions, and broader public inclusion rather than simple replication of Western liberal models.

Keywords: Liberal Democracy, Africa, Political Development, Democratic Consolidation, External Influence

Introduction

This paper asks whether externally driven liberal democracy has advanced democratic consolidation and good governance in Africa or instead generated new constraints and contradictions. More specifically, it examines whether these externally promoted reforms have strengthened democratic institutions, improved accountability, and enhanced public welfare, or whether they have produced fragile political systems characterised by internal vulnerabilities, persistent authoritarian tendencies, weak state capacity, and limited social progress. In doing so, the paper foregrounds the tension between procedural democratic change and the substantive political and developmental outcomes expected to follow from it.

Democracy is widely regarded as an effective form of government, but it takes different forms. Liberal democracy, usually associated with the West, differs from social democracy and is shaped in Africa by global influences. In this paper, liberal democracy refers to a system of regular elections, protected rights, accountable institutions, and the rule of law. Elections alone, however, do not constitute democracy; substantive democracy also requires civil liberties, minority protections, judicial independence, and limits on executive power (see Diamond, 1996; Zakaria, 1997; Cheeseman, 2015; Collier & Levitsky, 1997).

By the late 1980s, major political and economic shifts had accelerated the global spread of liberal democracy. Western states promoted liberal and neoliberal values such as

individual liberty, human rights, free markets, the rule of law, and democratic governance. Although this process generated a large literature on democracy promotion, the long-term effects of externally driven democratic change in Africa remain contested (Ake, 1991; Adetula, 2011). Much of that literature traces donor influence, but less critical work often privileges electoral procedures over deeper democratic values.

In Africa, neoliberal pressures pushed many authoritarian regimes toward democratic transition (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997). Although donors and development agencies are often credited with these reforms, domestic actors, including civil society, professional associations, and student and youth movements, were also central (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996). Yet many reforms remained incomplete, as political elites redirected popular mobilisation and advanced externally backed agendas. Early optimism soon faded as governance gains stalled, citizen dissatisfaction persisted, and democratic backsliding became more visible. UNECA observed that democratic consolidation remained in its infancy in most African countries (UNECA, 2009, 19), while later assessments pointed to corruption, weak public services, and persistent conflict (Freedom House, 2021). As a result, many new African democracies remain illiberal (Zakaria, 1997), and good governance remains elusive.

This paper critically examines liberal democracy as the basis of political reform in Africa. It assesses the outcomes of externally promoted democracy, questions whether Western models can deliver lasting good governance, and highlights their limits and unintended effects on political development. Empirically, it draws mainly on Afrobarometer survey data and comparative case studies. The quantitative analysis examines cross-national trends in support for democracy, institutional trust, and perceptions of governance, while the qualitative evidence traces democratic trajectories in selected countries and provides context for interpreting those trends.

Cases were selected purposively to capture variation in democratic consolidation and governance quality across regions, regime types, and reform trajectories. Ghana illustrates progress in electoral stability and civil liberties, while Cameroon and Zimbabwe show how procedural reforms may fail to produce substantive democracy. Nigeria and Kenya were chosen for competitive elections, electoral violence, and persistent struggles with corruption and inclusion, while Botswana and Mauritius represent relatively stable democracies. This variation supports broader comparative insight across African contexts.

Anecdotal accounts, documentary sources, and secondary literature supplement the primary data to connect statistical patterns with contextual analysis. Together, they show a recurring gap between strong public support for democracy and weak satisfaction with institutions and public-goods delivery. In many African countries, democratic aspirations have therefore not translated into stable, effective governance. The case studies further show how governance quality often determines whether democratic gains are sustained or reversed. Afrobarometer surveys nevertheless show broad support for democratic rule: across 39 countries in 2021-23, 66% preferred democracy, 78% opposed one-party rule, and 66% rejected military rule (Afrobarometer, 2024). Yet most African regimes remain unconsolidated hybrids. Although some evidence links democratisation to stronger

economic performance, these relationships are not automatically causal and may reflect factors such as transparency, property rights, policy choices, or prior institutional strength.

The analysis therefore treats causal claims cautiously, using temporal sequencing, controls for alternative explanations, and case-based process tracing where possible. Even so, data limitations and overlapping influences complicate firm causal inference. Fragile states continue to face slow growth, conflict, and humanitarian crises (Rotberg, 2002), a pattern visible in many new African democracies. According to the 2025 Human Development Index, no African democracy except Mauritius reached the very high category, though several ranked in the high or medium ranges.

In Africa, the assumption that liberal democracy automatically delivers human development and progress remains contested (see Ake, 1996; Ake, 2000; Diamond, 1999; Adetula, 2011; Cheeseman, 2015; Oduor, 2019; Afrobarometer, 2024). Despite the spread of democratic institutions, many states have seen limited gains in poverty reduction, accountable governance, and citizen satisfaction with public services. Persistent dissatisfaction and declining trust in multi-party regimes continue to undermine political stability in many new African democracies.

Liberal Democracy and Its Limits

Democracy represents a multifaceted concept, understood both as a process and as an outcome (Dahl, 1971; Diamond, 1999; O'Donnell, 1994). As a process, democracy involves the continuous development of institutions, practices, and norms that enable citizen participation, accountability, and representation. It encompasses the methods through which societies negotiate power, resolve conflicts, and respond to changing circumstances. The procedural dimension of democracy is clear in regular elections, institutional reforms, and the ongoing engagement of civil society in governance. Conversely, democracy as an outcome refers to the concrete accomplishments of these processes - such as the establishment of stable institutions, protection of civil liberties, and the realisation of inclusive governance (Ake, 2000; Diamond, 1999). This paired perspective permits the assessment of both the calibre and longevity of democratic systems, recognising that successful democratisation requires not only the adoption of democratic procedures but also the achievement of substantive outcomes that reflect the will and interests of the populace.

One concrete example of this interplay can be found in Ghana, where repeated peaceful transfers of power through competitive elections have gradually led to greater protections of civil liberties, stronger judicial independence, and enhanced respect for political and press freedoms (Gyimah-Boadi, 1996; Cheeseman, 2015). Here, the procedural reforms, such as regular and transparent elections, have translated into substantive gains for citizens, illustrating how process can become outcome. In contrast, countries such as Cameroon have continued to hold elections without attaining similar advances in rights or accountable governance, underscoring the limitations of procedural democracy in the absence of substantive change (Cheeseman, 2015; Freedom House, 2021). Conceptual models in political science emphasise the importance of both procedural and substantive dimensions, arguing that democracy is not a static end state, yet an evolving and contested practice (see Dahl, 1971; Diamond, 1999; and O'Donnell, 1994).

The nature of democracy is highly context-dependent, formed by local social, economic, and historical realities (Ake, 1996; Parekh, 1993; Cheeseman, 2015). The Western nations are mostly associated with liberal democracy, a political system which prioritises liberalism as the basis of the state, forming its structures, rationale, and principal actors. In this model, representation is ensured through authority being legitimised by elected representatives chosen in free and competitive elections, who are expected to act in accordance with the public will (Parekh, 1993). Participation, by contrast, refers to citizens' direct engagement within political processes beyond voting, such as public debates, civic activities, and decision-making. Liberal democracy is primarily concerned with whether a regime is representative or authoritarian, often focusing on the form of government rather than genuine public participation (Parekh, 1993; Onoge, 1997). This separation between representation and participation is significant. When representation is emphasised without sufficient attention to participation, there is a risk of hollow democracy in which citizens remain formally represented but are not fully engaged in forming their own governance.

Democracy is not a universal model; rather, it is adapted and reinterpreted according to prevailing cultural norms, historical experiences, and socio-economic conditions. For example, in settings where wealth and political power are concentrated among a small elite, broader segments of the population may perceive exclusion from decision-making, causing diminished faith in democratic institutions and potential social unrest. The context-specific character of democracy necessitates nuanced policy approaches and analytical frameworks that account for local variations in governance, participation, and legitimacy (Ake, 1996; Gyimah-Boadi, 1996; Cheeseman, 2015). In post-colonial Africa, democratic norms and attitudes are shaped by the ongoing effects of colonial governance, prevailing modes of resource allocation, and the organisation of power within society (Ake, 1996; Ake, 2000).

One of the major political developments of the twentieth century was the spread of liberal democracy. Francis Fukuyama promotes liberalism as the only basis of civilisation in the post-Cold War period through his thesis on "the unilinear view of modernisation" that associates liberalism with prosperity and 'liberal peace'. His "unilinear view of modernisation" reflects the liberal democratisation discourse whose central thesis is that liberal democracy will become the only form of government for all states as a mark of the "end of history". He argues that not only are all modernising societies going through basically the same process, but that an almost inevitable outcome of the process is political democratisation. According to him, the advent of Western liberal democracy may signal the endpoint of humanity's socio-cultural evolution and the final form of human government (Fukuyama, 1992, 48).

Samuel Huntington, however, challenged "the unilinear view of modernisation" and the fallacy that modernisation equals westernisation. According to him, while all societies share certain similarities in the modernisation process, they still retain distinctive traits. He also pointed out that the ancient conflict between civilisations replaced the temporary conflict between ideologies. According to him, the dominant culture decides the form of human government. While Huntington argued against Western values as permanent universal values, he implicitly alluded to the "West is best" fallacy (Huntington, 1997).

The idea that liberal democracy is universally applicable overlooks its roots in distinct Western socio-cultural contexts and ignores the diversity of political histories and social structures found elsewhere. When liberal democratic values and institutions are transferred to non-Western societies, they often clash with local traditions and priorities, raising doubts about their effectiveness and legitimacy. Problems arise when assumptions of universality overshadow the need for adaptation to local realities, as evidenced by persistent debates over the transferability of Western-style democracy in Africa and other regions (Oduor, 2019). This stresses the importance of recognising that models developed in one environment may not yield the same outcomes when transplanted to another, and calls for critical reflection on how democratic reforms align with local conditions. Claude Ake drew attention to the fact that liberal democracy is a “product of a socially atomized society where production and exchange are already commoditized, a society which is essentially a market. It is the product of a society in which interests are so particularized that the very notion of common interest becomes problematic hence the imperative of democracy” (Ake, 1993, 242–243).

The adoption of liberal democracy, as the dominant ideology of political order, makes room for liberalism to “determine the nature of the state (formal, abstract), its structures (separate from the autonomous civil society, a clear separation between public and private), its rationale (protection of the basic rights of its citizens) and its basic units (individuals rather than groups or communities)” (Parekh, 1993, 165). This version of democracy “specifies who constitutes the legitimate government and wields the authority inherent in the state (the elected representatives), how they acquire authority (free elections, choice between parties) and how they exercise it (in broad harmony with public opinion)” (Parekh, 1993, 165). In this way, the concern and focus of liberal democracy are on whether the regime is authoritarian or representative. This explains why the democratisation project in Africa is essentially dominated by an emphasis on the type of government in place, with little or no consideration for the “authentic participation of the people” (Onoge, 1997, 5).

Within the context of neoliberalism, democracy is no more than “a form of political regime in which citizens choose, in competitive elections, the occupants of the political offices of the state”. Conceived in this way, a transition to democracy is deemed to have occurred “with the installation of a government chosen based on one competitive election, as long as all the contestants accept the validity of the election results” (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997, 13). The main concern is whether elections are conducted “within a matrix of civil liberties” (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997, 12). Democratic practices are increasingly linked to the electoral cycle and the conduct of regular elections, and are widely regarded as contributing positively to the processes and outcomes of democratisation.

The idea that the mere repetition of elections strengthens democracy in sub-Saharan Africa was celebrated by Staffan Lindberg (2006), among others. However, many elections in Africa have failed to produce democracy (Teshome-Bahiru, 2008); instead, they have produced fraudulent leadership and eroded legitimacy. The report by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa notes that “the quality of elections remains suspect in many countries. Often they are less a peaceful means of transferring

power than a trigger of conflict” (UNECA, 2009, 3). The experiences of many African countries have shown that holding elections is not a sufficient condition for democratisation and good governance (Ake, 2000; Cheeseman, 2015).

Although it is claimed that “the consolidation of democracy, in the long run, involves the permanent establishment of many other valued institutions such as civilian control of the military, independent legislatures, and courts, viable opposition parties and voluntary associations, plus a free press”, liberal democracy still restricts the “necessary condition of democracy” to national elections. Indeed, some have argued that it is “the first step without which democracy cannot otherwise be born” (Bratton & Van de Walle, 1997, 13). However, this disembodied conception of democracy makes little or no effort to take the broader picture of democratisation into account. It also ignores that development occurs only through political empowerment enabled by genuine democratisation. Ake’s remarks aptly draw focus to this conceptual confusion:

The trivialisation of democracy has, in turn, trivialised notions of what democratisation entails and what it takes for others to support democracy; it has led to the confusion of democracy processes with democratic outcomes. Thus, external support for democracy has tended to focus on multi-party elections, easy tolerance of non-competitive electoral contests, and the presumption that voting amounts to choosing (Ake, 2000, 30).

Undoubtedly, the situation in many African countries is a far cry from genuine and substantive democracy, which, for instance, emphasises broad-based participation, popular sovereignty, and the meeting of requirements and hopes on a self-sustaining basis (Ake, 2000; Onoge, 1997).

Arguably, the interventions by donors, development partners, and other providers of development assistance, especially the promotion of democracy and governance in Africa, are inextricably linked to the minimalist conception of democracy. In this context, the issues of human rights, civil liberties, the rule of law, free and fair elections, good governance, and public participation serve as parameters for measuring democratic progress. The debate about what attributes to include in the minimalist definition of democracy is quite rich. While some scholars are satisfied with “the smallest possible number of attributes that are still seen as producing a viable standard of democracy”, others add “fully contested elections with full suffrage and the absence of massive fraud, combined with effective guarantees of civil liberties, including freedom of speech, assembly and association”, as well as conditions such as “the criteria that elected governments must have effective power to govern” (Collier & Levitsky, 1997, 431). These attempts at conceptualising democracy have not fully addressed the difficulties presented by the global ‘wave of democratisation’ in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Eastern Europe, where a great diversity of national political regimes emerged.

Beyond characterising democracy in terms of political attributes and criteria, the minimalist conception of democracy assumes a causal link between democracy and economic performance. This perspective views modernisation as a complicated process involving the evolution of economic, social, and political systems, with economic development usually preceding political democracy. Thus, Western donors emphasise the

relationship linking economic development and democracy, drawing on Western experience, in the design and implementation of democracy assistance programmes in developing countries (Fukuyama, 1992; Diamond, 1999). However, given that many societies that experienced democratisation in the 1980s and 1990s are at different stages of economic development, questions arise about economic development as a prerequisite for democratisation. Also, the thesis that projects the “West is best” ideology as the only path to democracy for the modern world needs to be questioned (Ake, 1996; Oduor, 2019).

Experimentation with Electoral Democracy in Africa

The ‘wave of democratisation’ during the 1990s contributed to several positive developments in Africa. Notable changes include the end of apartheid and the establishment of majority rule in South Africa in 1994, a transition widely discussed in studies of democratic change and consolidation (Suttner, 2004); the expansion of political space in select one-party states; the end of personal rule; and the termination of oppressive authoritarian regimes. Currently, Africa is experiencing an era of multi-party electoral democracy, characterised by periodic elections in numerous countries. Support for regular elections from both national governments and the international community is evident. Between 1989 and 1994, 38 African nations conducted competitive elections, with an additional 11 states holding their first elections between 1995 and 1997. Sixteen countries also organised subsequent elections during this period (International Peace Institute, 2010, 14). In 2021, more than 10 countries held elections, and approximately 20 countries conducted presidential or general elections in 2024. Across Africa, 15 countries held general, presidential, or legislative elections (Peace and Security Council, 2025). However, the proliferation of multi-party elections has not consistently led to political stability or the consolidation of democratic norms.

Electoral competition in Africa frequently intersects with existing societal cleavages, particularly those based on ethnicity and regional identity. In cases where political parties are organised along ethnic lines or possess strong regional bases, elections often serve to intensify group rivalries rather than resolve them (Mozaffar, Scarritt & Galaichi, 2000). Intense competition for political office, combined with weak institutional frameworks, compels politicians to depend on ethnic loyalties and patronage networks. In most of Africa’s emerging democracies, social identities such as ethnicity, religion, culture, and language strongly influence voting behaviour, while the impact of electoral tactics is comparatively limited. This pattern often results in the politicisation of public resources, allegations of corruption, and increased mistrust among communities.

When citizens perceive electoral processes as unfair or manipulated, tensions may escalate into conflict or violence, particularly when state capacity to manage disputes is low. A simplified causal framework illustrates these relationships: The introduction of competitive multi-party elections increases the stakes of political contests, especially where party affiliations correspond to ethnic or regional identities. Political campaigns frequently exploit group loyalties, intensifying divisions, fostering zero-sum perspectives, and escalating competition for scarce state resources. The necessity to secure victory may prompt corrupt practices such as vote-buying, result manipulation, or patronage, all of which undermine institutional trust. This sequence of events explains why competitive

elections can worsen, rather than alleviate, community tensions. For instance, in Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire, electoral contests have deepened ethnic antagonisms and, at times, incited violence. In Nigeria, the convergence of regional and ethnic allegiances with party politics has frequently led to allegations of malpractice and heightened societal mistrust, underscoring the risks of polarisation.

However, these dynamics are not inevitable. Specific institutional safeguards can help break the causal chain from ethnic mobilisation to violence by fostering inclusion and building trust in electoral processes. For example, the adoption of independent, well-resourced electoral commissions, proportional representation systems, requirements for multi-ethnic party registration, power-sharing arrangements, and credible dispute-resolution mechanisms can help ensure fairer outcomes and enhance legitimacy. Additionally, civic education initiatives and reforms that promote transparency in the management of electoral disputes play a crucial role in preventing escalation. Introducing and strengthening such institutional reforms are essential for disrupting the patterns of polarisation and can provide durable foundations for peaceful, competitive politics. These prospects will be discussed in more detail in later sections of this paper.

Some countries have made limited progress in strengthening democratic norms and governance, but service delivery remains weak in many states. Afrobarometer data show that most Africans still prefer democracy: 66% favour it, while majorities reject one-person rule (80%), one-party rule (78%), and military rule (66%) (Afrobarometer, 2024). Yet support has declined over the past decade, from about 73% in 2012 to 66% in 2022, pointing to growing disillusionment with democratic performance. Satisfaction with democracy and opposition to military rule have also weakened, while many citizens remain dissatisfied with security, education, and healthcare. These patterns challenge the claim that external democratic models alone can deliver durable consolidation.

Bleck and Van de Walle identify economic development as an important outcome of electoral democracy in Africa. Economic development is the most prominent issue in party discourse during election cycles, accounting for 43% of all discussions (2019). Africa has reportedly made “impressive progress in dealing with other development challenges” since the early 2000s, including achieving the world’s highest economic growth rates, improving the business environment and investment climate, and expanding the labour force (Ascher & Mirovitskaya, 2013, 3). Despite these higher growth rates, the majority of the population has not benefited proportionally from national wealth. High poverty rates persist alongside substantial income inequality across many African countries, which continues to weaken electoral accountability by concentrating economic and political power among a small elite and making it harder for ordinary citizens to hold leaders responsible (World Bank, 2026).

Economic inequality restricts democratic development and economic freedom, perpetuating social exclusion. In many African democracies, reforms have mainly benefited elites, leaving wealth distribution unchanged. Citizens, commonly led by politically active youth, protest insufficient public services, poor living conditions, and perceived injustices. Organised demonstrations, digital activism, and informal participation have become more prevalent, amplifying protest movements. These actions have promoted alternative ways to assert sovereignty and challenge state authority,

reflecting Frantz Fanon's rationale for the oppressed's resistance and broader traditions of democratic struggle on the continent (Shivji, 2003). Across Africa, protests often focus on service delivery to demand good governance (Afrobarometer, 2024). In Tunisia and Egypt, opposition to the state triggered widespread uprisings across the Arab world. Economic stagnation, exploitation, repression, and discrimination have driven these movements, fueling demands for political and economic reform and, in some cases, regime change, especially in countries with lower education levels and scarce access to electricity. Countries such as Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Niger, Nigeria, Togo, Tunisia, and Senegal have also experienced sustained protest movements, increasing pressure on human rights (Daoud & Siviude, 2024).

Opposition is frequently suppressed in certain African countries, including Benin, Gabon, and Mauritania, as governments experiment with liberal democracy. Democratic progress, as measured by freedom and tolerance for opposition, is evident primarily in a few countries such as Cape Verde, Mauritius, Botswana, and Ghana (Freedom House, 2021). Many states are classified as democracies primarily because they conduct elections. For instance, post-Apartheid South Africa's multi-racial elections have not ensured the full inclusion of all social groups. In Burundi, Guinea, Chad, Rwanda, Congo, and other countries, authoritarian leaders often seek to extend their tenure through constitutional amendments. These amendments frequently circumvent established democratic norms by modifying term limits or electoral rules, allowing incumbents to remain in power past their original mandates. Such practices weaken democratic accountability and contribute to political tensions, as demonstrated by widespread protests and increased opposition to unconstitutional changes in government (de Wet, 2021; Wiebusch & Murray, 2019). In marked contrast, countries like Botswana have consistently respected presidential term limits and peaceful succession, strengthening the legitimacy of democratic institutions and demonstrating that backsliding is neither uniform nor inevitable. This difference in approaches highlights how some African states, such as Botswana, continue to uphold core democratic tenets, while others experience recurrent challenges to democratic consolidation.

Political succession is critical in Africa because it shapes the effectiveness and durability of civil governance (Banjo, 2008, 34). As shown above, multi-party elections have not consistently produced democratic consolidation or stability, while ethnic and regional competition, electoral manipulation, and the politicisation of public resources have often deepened mistrust and conflict. Succession mechanisms and norms therefore strongly influence the course of democracy, stability, and development and frequently lie at the centre of political crises. As Mahmud Tukur notes, succession "as a process and an event in the life of polity is two-fold": it ensures leadership continuity and helps legitimise power (Tukur, 1999, 105). Even where procedures are established, succession can still generate tension and pressure (Banjo, 2008, 33), and presidential incumbents and challengers often approach electoral competition as if it were warfare.

Although multi-party democracy has increased public support for presidential term limits, some governments still pursue unconstitutional tenure extensions. In Nigeria, despite repeated denials, President Obasanjo was widely believed to have sought a third term and to have influenced the choice of his successor (Obasanjo, 2014; Odinkalu & Osori, 2018;

Nnamani, 2019). These efforts often involve constitutional amendments, manipulation of legislative majorities, emergency decrees, and pressure on judicial bodies to validate contested changes or weaken opposition. In 2024, Togo faced a crisis after a “constitutional coup” reportedly extended term limits through parliamentary supermajorities and expedited procedures that curtailed public debate.

Additionally, there have been instances in which courts or electoral commissions whose independence was compromised endorsed these changes and suppressed judicial challenges from opposition groups. Despite the African Union’s opposition to unconstitutional changes of government, illegal tenure extensions, and manipulation of incumbency, these practices persist. Efforts to establish term limits within the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) have failed due to concerns about unregulated competition for political office.

In recent years, Africa has seen a resurgence of coups and countercoups, especially in the Sahel, posing renewed challenges to democratic development. Since 2020, major military takeovers have occurred in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon, alongside events in Guinea-Bissau and an attempted coup in Benin in 2025. Other cases, including Côte d’Ivoire, Zimbabwe, Equatorial Guinea, Mauritania, Sudan, and Chad, further highlight the fragility of democratic institutions and the continued political influence of the military across the continent.

Many African countries are experiencing or emerging from conflict (Adetula, 2015). UCDP data show that 2022 was among the most violent recent years globally, with 55 active state-based conflicts and severe concentrations in parts of sub-Saharan Africa (Davies, Pettersson & Öberg, 2023). ACLED similarly reports exceptionally high levels of conflict and political violence across Africa in 2023, especially in the Sahel and other fragile settings (ACLED, 2023). These patterns reflect multiple interacting factors, including the failure of liberal democracy to deliver effective governance. The assumption that liberal democratic systems would automatically produce good governance and reduce violent conflict in Africa has therefore been increasingly questioned (Adetula, 2011; Adetula, 2015). Since the 1990s, multi-party politics has not consistently improved governance or reduced violence, as weak institutions, politicised social divisions, and segregationist practices continue to undermine stability and democratic consolidation. As a result, many African states remain vulnerable to recurrent turmoil despite formally democratic structures.

External Assistance and Support

The changing international environment has reinforced neoliberalism, with Western states promoting liberal democracy through substantial bilateral and multilateral support. Donors such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the European Commission, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the World Bank Group continue to fund governance, elections, and institutional reform in Africa. OECD data show that Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Africa fell by nearly 7% in 2023 to about USD 74 billion, though support for government and civil society in Sub-Saharan Africa remained an important channel for democracy-related assistance (OECD,

2024). U.S. assistance to Sub-Saharan Africa has also remained around USD 8 billion annually in recent years, although democracy, human rights, and governance make up only part of that total (Congressional Research Service, 2023). While this support has helped strengthen civil society and oversight of political processes, it has also aligned reforms closely with donor priorities.

The European Union now channels most external democracy and governance support through NDICI–Global Europe, a 2021–2027 instrument worth about €79.5 billion, including €60.38 billion for geographic programmes and €6.358 billion for thematic areas such as human rights, democracy, and civil society (European Commission, 2021). In Africa’s 2024 “super election year,” UNDP-supported initiatives reached at least 76 million voters (UNDP, 2025). The World Bank also approved USD 20.8 billion for the Africa region in fiscal year 2020 across 156 operations, though this broader development portfolio should not be equated directly with democracy assistance (World Bank, 2020).

This steady flow of assistance has given external actors significant influence over political reform and policy priorities in recipient states. Countries seeking aid, trade concessions, or other support were often expected to meet Western political criteria and adopt liberal democratic principles (Adetula, 2011, 11). Donors routinely funded electoral processes in emerging democracies to promote fairness, transparency, and participation, often setting the standards for credibility and legitimacy when local capacity was weak. Yet while Western actors promoted multi-party elections, they at times accepted uncompetitive contests, effectively equating voting with genuine democratic choice (Ake, 2000).

At the same time, the record of donor conditionality has not been universally negative. For example, in Benin’s 1991 transition, strong donor pressure, coupled with suspension of aid, incentivised the incumbent regime to accept a national conference and competitive elections, ultimately resulting in a peaceful and widely regarded democratic transition. Similarly, under international pressure, Madagascar’s leadership in the early 1990s agreed to a process that opened space for competition and political liberalisation. These cases demonstrate that, under specific circumstances, donor conditionality has contributed to successful regime change and democratic reforms. Nonetheless, such successes remain context-dependent, and elsewhere, conditionality has failed to deliver similar outcomes, highlighting the complex and varied impact of external support on democratic development.

African civil society organisations have challenged donor-driven frameworks by calling for greater local ownership and context-sensitive approaches. The Ghana Centre for Democratic Development observed that external funding can support reform only when matched by genuine local participation (CDD-Ghana, 2018). Similarly, the Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC) found that some donor practices marginalise grassroots groups, underscoring the need to engage diverse local voices (Kenya Human Rights Commission, 2019). The broader question, however, is whether external assistance entrenches liberal norms or reproduces neoliberal dependency. Donor support often privileges the Euro-American model of liberal democracy through emphasis on the rule of law, civil liberties, and elections, while treating citizens less as agents of change than as victims of poor governance (Adetula, 2011; Ake, 1991).

Working with Africa's new "democratic" regimes, donors promoted neoliberal reforms tied to aid conditionalities, including privatisation, retrenchment, and reduced social spending. In Ghana, these reforms made health and education less affordable, while in Zambia, public-sector downsizing pushed many citizens into insecure informal work. Yet despite extensive support to electoral commissions, parties, media, and civil society, the promise of liberal democracy remains contested. Election monitoring often legitimises flawed processes rather than transforms them. Still, donor support has sometimes improved electoral integrity: in Sierra Leone's 2012 elections, international assistance in logistics, official training, and civil society monitoring helped boost transparency and voter confidence (UNDP, 2012).

While several international donors and development partners have delivered considerable development assistance to promote democracy and good governance, intended to address claims that African states lack effective institutions, there has been limited tangible improvement in the lives of many people across the continent. Reflecting these challenges, several donor evaluation reports and internal reviews have documented persistent doubts among aid officials regarding the real value and impact of democracy assistance. For example, an internal review by the European Commission (European Commission, 2021, 22) found that only a minority of projects in sub-Saharan Africa met their stated governance objectives. A 2022 OECD survey of donor representatives indicated that more than 60 per cent expressed scepticism about the long-term sustainability of externally supported democratic reforms (OECD, 2022, 47). These findings point to documented unease within donor agencies about the effectiveness and ultimate outcomes of international democracy support in African countries.

African Regional Support

African governments and regional organisations, especially the African Union (AU), have actively promoted democracy and good governance. The AU advances these aims through frameworks such as its Constitutive Act, the Lomé Declaration, and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance. It also deploys election observation missions and suspends states following unconstitutional transfers of power. Unlike many external donor initiatives, AU interventions are guided by regionally defined norms and collective responses to member-state challenges. In practice, the AU has suspended coup-affected states and mediated efforts to restore constitutional order on its own terms.

Although these measures have helped deter unconstitutional changes and support democratic transitions, enforcement remains uneven and sanctions are often tied to subsequent elections. This inconsistency reflects limited monitoring capacity, the difficulty of securing consensus among states with divergent interests, and weak political will when influential members are involved. In some cases, member states lobby for leniency or quick readmission, weakening the AU's resolve. Even so, these mechanisms show that regional actors are not merely implementing external agendas but shaping their own democratic governance framework.

Sub-regional bodies such as ECOWAS and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) also address election-related issues. ECOWAS, for example, adopted a protocol on democracy and good governance that requires access to power

through fair elections. Its effectiveness, however, varies across West Africa. In Senegal's 2012 presidential election, ECOWAS actively supported domestic actors and pressured President Abdoulaye Wade to respect term limits and the electoral outcome, helping secure a credible transfer of power to Macky Sall. By contrast, in Togo's 2020 presidential election, opposition parties and civil society alleged serious malpractice, while ECOWAS observers noted shortcomings but still endorsed the results. Critics argued that this muted response failed to confront deeper problems of constitutional manipulation and executive concentration. Together, the Senegal and Togo cases show that sub-regional frameworks can uphold democratic norms when political will exists, but often fall short when incumbents are entrenched or outcomes are contested.

These organisations still focus mainly on electoral processes, often neglecting broader dimensions of governance such as public goods provision and anti-corruption. The 2021 Ibrahim Index of African Governance found that only 14 of 54 African countries had improved public service delivery since 2010, while many stagnated or declined in sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure. Transparency International's 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index likewise showed that many countries remained below the global average, with limited progress against official misconduct. These patterns suggest that electoral fairness alone does not guarantee better everyday governance. Additional initiatives, including UNECA reports and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), seek to strengthen governance and curb undue influence over political parties. Yet significant challenges remain. Many initiatives focus on formal democratic structures while neglecting the harder task of building resilient institutions. Constitutional crises, military coups, and ongoing external dependency are not always adequately addressed. External dependency can further weaken institutions by limiting long-term investment, rewarding compliance with donor priorities over local capacity building, and encouraging disruptive policy shifts. Regional frameworks remain important, but sustainable and locally grounded governance requires deeper institutional commitment and more flexible strategies.

An important unresolved issue is how constitutional design can reduce African democracies' vulnerability to external financial pressures. Future research should examine how institutions can protect governance from debt crises, policy conditionality, and external shocks while preserving domestic autonomy. Exploring whether debt relief and development finance can be constitutionally insulated from political manipulation would offer a useful direction for comparative analysis and more resilient democratic design.

Conclusion

The paper argues that liberal democracy in Africa has too often remained procedural rather than substantive. Although electoral reforms and civil society expansion have opened political space, they have not consistently produced accountable governance, effective public service delivery, or durable democratic consolidation. Persistent inequality, weak state capacity, corruption, exclusion, and external dependency continue to undermine legitimacy and leave many regimes vulnerable to instability, authoritarian relapse, and conflict.

The simultaneous pursuit of political and economic liberalisation has frequently exposed the limits of state capacity rather than strengthened it. In many cases, reforms centred on elections and market adjustment have weakened states' ability to deliver justice, accountability, and public goods, while deepening public frustration and distrust. As a result, many African democracies remain marked by exclusion, unresponsiveness, abuse of power, and declining legitimacy.

Democratic consolidation in Africa therefore depends on integrated political and economic reforms that address inequality, exclusion, and weak institutional capacity together. Reform must move beyond procedural democracy to substantive outcomes that improve citizens' everyday lives through stronger public institutions, greater accountability, broader inclusion, and more effective delivery of public goods.

Three practical priorities follow: community-based budgeting to improve participation and transparency in public spending; regional peer review of presidential term limits and constitutional compliance; and anti-corruption innovation partnerships linking civil society, technical experts, and public institutions. More broadly, democratic reform must be context-sensitive, responsive to African social realities, and grounded in inclusive development rather than one-size-fits-all models.

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