

The Question of Democracy: Universal Value or An Ideal

Elazia, Paul Major., Jallow, B. Isatou, Wanyonyi, Shinanchi Michael

Yerevan State University, Kenya

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51584/IJRIAS.2024.90311>

Received: 23 February 2024; Accepted: 29 February 2024; Published: 30 March 2024

ABSTRACT

Democracy signifies the rule of the people by which decisions are made by the majority in terms of how they are governed, and this concept has finally come to be construed as a form of government where sovereign powers are vested in elected representatives. Social scientists debate whether democracy is an ideal or a value. In that sense, we argue that it is a value that can lead to good governance and makes a State meet its obligation of ensuring that its citizens enjoy their rights fully and if there are derogations, done within the limits of the prescribed law. However, we treat democracy as an ideal because it can never be realized in totality and Dahl's concept of polyarchy takes center stage in the practice of democracy.

THE QUESTION OF DEMOCRACY: UNIVERSAL VALUE OR AN IDEAL?

The concept of democracy has its origins in ancient Greece where it was coined from the phrases “*demos*” and “*kratos*” which means people and power/rule respectively (Nwogu, 2018; Sen, 1999). Democracy signifies the rule of the people by which decisions are made that govern them, and this concept has finally come to be construed as a form of government where sovereign powers are vested in elected representatives. Democracy in its simplest form is construed as a system of leadership in which elected representatives are mandated through the sovereign will of the people to manage their affairs, where a democratic framework of legitimacy, justice, freedom, and power works best (Executive Agency within the Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio, 2023). While democracy is sought by many, it is not always reflected in the fabric and affairs of a nation as a sovereign will, and an expression, of a people. To understand my argument, let us revisit the concept of democracy.

Over time, scholars agree that democracy is a system of governance where elected representatives are elected based on the pursuit of free and fair elections, where the government is/or can be replaced in an election, and that the citizenry indulge actively in public affairs of governance and civic life. Furthermore, in this context, democracy implies protecting human rights perpetually while operating within the meaning of the rule of law and procedures, which applies equally to all subjects of that government (Nwogu, 2018). Democracy is formed through the institutions of governance, with common practices of universal suffrage ingrained in it, with clear mentalities and definite ideological norms and values that advance it (Raaflaub et al., 2007). The proclamation of Abraham Lincoln, a former president of the United States of America, in his Gettysburg Address on 19th November 1863 stated, in part, “... and that government of the people, by the people, for the people...” (*The Gettysburg Address*, 1863), was a summation of the concept of democracy. It is expressed by Merriam (1941) where he states that it must demonstrate “confidence in the value of the consent of the governed expressed in the institutions, understandings and practices as a basis of order, liberty [and] justice.”

Examined in the perspective of what Abraham Lincoln describes as government of the people, by the people and for the people is a government legitimately approved by the citizens to act as their government,

managing their interests in a manner they so desire, and in so doing, making the citizens feel that they have a say in their government because they “own” their government through the practices of democratic ideals. At this juncture, the question of democracy as a universal value comes into play with the observance that the four democratic ideals (Executive Agency within the Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio, 2023). First, legitimacy is a concern that needs to be fulfilled, so that the citizenry ‘own’ their government that responds to the dictates of the sovereign will that is manifested by the majority in an election. Legitimacy is a question of having a valid mandate to run the government of the day, where election results are acceptable to all even the losers through a transparent and accountable electoral process. The second ideal is justice and equity, where all the citizens are subject to equal treatment in an environment in which they subsist with dignity and respect under the rule of law. Third, freedoms and human rights are observed by everybody. Lastly, the exercise of power through constitutionalism must be a principle that operates actively.

We stand by the argument that democracy is a universal ideal and not a universal value. This conceptualization of democracy is heavily influenced by Dahl who postulated that democracy is characterized by power being vested in different centres of power to countercheck each sphere of influence from being dominant (Dahl, 1971). It is an ideal because it describes the best practices of governance which, at times, is purported to be practiced when in reality it does not exist. When the ideals of democracy are not present, democracy is a failure whose value is negated. In the 2007/8 post-election crisis was due to perceived lack of legitimacy in the re-election of President Mwai Kibaki from some of the electorates in Kenya who manifested violence in the protests. This is a classic example where the dismal performance of democratic accountability defines a sense of illegitimacy in political figures and regimes within the continent (Adejumobi, 2000).

The issue of trust is put to question when the democratic playing field is riddled with misinformation, disinformation and propaganda which erode the value of relying on the truth to make public policy decisions, through the framework of democracy ideals in realizing its true value. This creates a space for which democracy, with its fair share of pretenders who purport to support it, “may exploit sources of discontent” (King, 2023). It is here that people are duped to participate in valid electoral process to create new governments that do not obey Abraham Lincoln’s mantra of a government of, by and for the people. Where such an electoral outcome is contested, the veil of “supreme and sovereign will of the people” can be defended in court when in reality the electoral process was flawed by misinformation, disinformation and acute propaganda that came into play.

King (2023) argues that “... trust can be tied to institutions: how well they perform or appear to deliver for the people, and whether they function autonomously.” Thus, may be the issue of misinforming the public about the credibility of electoral bodies particularly in Africa develop this kind of harm to trust. It follows that, with such condemnation of the electoral systems and institutions as being impartial, the real value of democracy is eroded further when other players become entangled into such blame, whether by merit or deceit, trust becomes a tool that is lost, making the ideal of democracy apparent but the value absent. This is echoed by Adams & Asante (2020) when they assert that the judicial processes of resolving post-election violence in Ghana have been key in advancing the value of democracy in that country. That is where the problem again lies, when the judicial decisions do not augur well with public perceptions of democracy as a fair way of electing a government of the people. This has been observed in Kenya, Zimbabwe and Ivory Coast amongst other African countries (Adams & Asante, 2020).

The idea being pursued in this essay is that the ideals of democracy are what everyone desires. It is what is valued if realized in that saintly state. Yet, democracy may, *prima facie*, is highly valued, but, seriously undermined by the political players. However, the fabric of democracy is tainted not by the outcome of elections but by what goes into constructing the public perceptions of democracy these very same political players. Volatile elections world over have been preceded by intense campaigns that are heavily laced with

propaganda and innuendoes that distort the correct perception of the policies being proposed in manifestos. The great democracy of United States was put to test with the aftermath of the Capital attack showing how misinformation and propaganda can attack the very foundations of the democratic ideals, rendering the value of democracy useless. In regard to that, it was observed that "... One of the drivers of decreased confidence in the political system has been the explosion of misinformation deliberately aimed at disrupting the democratic process. This confuses and overwhelms voters..." (Rodriguez, 2022). This observation by Rodriguez (2022) sets a clear reason why the perception of just, fairness and equality needs to be safeguarded for the democratic ideals to give the value of democracy meaning, in its existence within the system of selecting governments and representatives of the people.

The notion that elected representatives represent the will of the people may not always be true but a fallacy in active operation. Recently in Kenya, the Finance Bill of 2023 has been heavily opposed by the citizenry yet it has been passed by the elected parliamentarians (Reuters, 2023). In America, Hillary Clinton won the popular vote but the American system recognizes the collegiate system which drove Donald Trump to power. Here, the dilemma is which of the two systems represents real democracy? On this end, democracy is perceived as more of a system that has been adopted by many countries, from the signing of Magna Carta in 1215 to the French Revolution, and American Revolution and seeks to be rooted in post-colonial Africa (Sen, 1999). On this I doubt its value being universally acclaimed where in some countries in the world, it's only the vestiges of democracy that are apparent in totalitarian regimes like in North Korea and Russia. It is the same kind of doubts that are cast on some African leaders who force constitutional changes to prolong their stay in power using democratic institutions.

In the concept of polyarchy as a manifestation of the practical realization of democracy, which lies on the right extreme end of the continuum between autocratic and democratic governance, voting is essential in which the majority elect the candidate's whose policy they approve but it does not mean that they all agree to it, because it may constitute tyranny of the majority over the minority which destroys the very concept of democracy, the involvement of everybody in the key decision-making processes of the society. It is from this perspective that we argue democracy is an ideal that can never be realized fully, but as a value, it can be used to promote inclusive governance and the rule of law which supports the respect of human rights and its protection.

We therefore conclude that democracy as a value is not a universal asset operating within the governance systems of many countries. In my view, democracy is still an ideal that is being pursued, even the so-called democracies of the world such as the United States has been faced with situations where democratic values were nearly placed on the precipice of termination by the post-Trump presidency up to date. In Kenya, claims of democratic institutions being manipulated against the will of the people has played a role in the development of voter apathy between 2007 to 2022 period (Iraki, 2022). We argue democracy is not a universal value because its core ideals are not present in all the democracies of the world.

REFERENCES

1. Adams, S., & Asante, W. (2020). The judiciary and post-election conflict resolution and democratic consolidation in Ghana's Fourth Republic. *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 38(2), 243–256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02589001.2020.1758639>
2. Adejumbi, S. (2000). Elections in Africa: A Fading Shadow of Democracy? On JSTOR. *International Political Science Review*, 21(1), 59–73.
3. Dahl, R. (1971). *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition*. Yale University Press.
4. Executive Agency within the Prime Minister and Cabinet Portfolio. (2023). Defining democracy [Item]. Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House; corporatename: Old Parliament House, Executive Agency within the Prime Minister and Cabinet portfolio. <https://www.moadoph.gov.au/democracy/defining-democracy>

5. Iraki, X. N. (2022, August 13). Why youth apathy in elections bodes ill for Kenya. *The Conversation*. <http://theconversation.com/why-youth-apaty-in-elections-bodes-ill-for-kenya-188662>
6. King, F. (2023, June 20). Democracy and the Crisis of Trust. *Foreign Policy*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/sponsored/democracy-and-the-crisis-of-trust/>
7. Nwogu, G. A. I. (2018). Democracy: Its Meaning and Dissenting Opinions of the Political Class in Nigeria: A Philosophical Approach. *Journal of Education and Practice*, 6(4), 131–144.
8. Raaflaub, K. A., Ober, J., Wallace, R. W., Cartledge, P., & Farrar, C. (2007). *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece* (1st ed.). University of California Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pp9pt>
9. Reuters. (2023, June 14). Factbox: Main measures in Kenya's contentious finance bill. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/main-measures-kenyas-contentious-finance-bill-2023-06-14/>
10. Rodriguez, G. R. S., Keesha Middlemass, and Aila. (2022, July 26). Misinformation is eroding the public's confidence in democracy. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2022/07/26/misinformation-is-eroding-the-publics-confidence-in-democracy/>
11. Sen, A. K. (1999). Democracy as a Universal Value. *Journal of Democracy*, 10(3), 3–17. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.1999.0055>
12. The Gettysburg Address. (1863). Abraham Lincoln Online. <https://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/gettysburg.htm>