

# History of the role of democracy in the world essay

[Politics](#), [Democracy](#)



It is increasingly becoming doubtful; if it is possible for some countries and societies to successfully transit from their autocratic governments to democratic societies. A good number of these societies have obtained independence from colonial rule in less than a hundred years ago.

While Most established democracies have generally taken centuries to fully embed the tenets of democracy in their governments and societies, it has been expected that young nations emerging from colonial rule in recent decades would establish democracies within a much shorter period. It has been expected that; the development of democracies in these societies would be catalyzed by the increasingly emerging global community; greatly driven by western democracies.

These democracies have been striving to promote democracy mainly because; democracy has been believed to promote human rights and has also encouraged economic prosperity and the general wellbeing of societies where it thrives. Just as history can ascertain, transition from autocratic to democratic societies has been a painful and a difficult road where enormous challenges have been encountered.

The difficult road to the attainment of democracy that has been experienced by western nations is the same road that is currently traveled by struggling democracies. This paper explores the challenges that are currently hindering the successful transition by some societies from autocracy to democracy.

Democracy has become a key word that is often mentioned to define an ideal society today. Major world powers today have embraced the ideology

of democracy; which is thought to be the main ingredient that has driven their economies to admirable levels and one that has generally guarded the wellbeing of every person in their societies (Hilla University for Humanistic Studies).

Democracy therefore permeates from the government to the society in significant ways. A democratic society is not therefore just a society that elects its government representatives in a transparent and open manner. A democratic society is also a society where the government hears and respects the voice of every citizen in decision making (Hilla University for humanistic Studies).

Citizens in democratic societies are normally empowered to guard their rights and will constantly and continuously check their governments; not only ensure that they do not abuse their powers but also to ensure that they respect their active and passive voices in every action that they (governments) take. In a democratic society, the citizens are never wrong. They only need to enshrine whatever they think is best for them in their constitutions, and consciousness.

Having set the bar quite high in understating the basic aspects of democracy, it becomes doubtful whether; any society in our planet today has really achieved democracy. It is however easier to differentiate between a society that respects and strives towards democracy and one that does not. Where the government has not created a framework for a transparent and fair process of electing government representatives, democracy has failed.

The same applies where the government does not respect the voice of its citizens, or where universal human rights are constantly abused. Unlike their democratic counterparts, societies where democracy has failed are therefore burdened by high poverty levels, disrespect for human rights among other common elements present in these societies (Hilla University for Humanistic Studies).

Many historians generally credit the Greeks for inventing the concept of democracy. Indeed, many aspects of the global society in general and the western society in particular were first coined by Greeks. Spartans created a government that was run by five officials who were elected by a few citizens (Mathews and Platt 40). The Spartan government was therefore based on a constitutional framework that guided the elective process and allowed for the passage of laws by high class citizens (Mathews and Platt 40).

Among the laws that were passed by high class citizens in Sparta included; laws that bared immigration as well as those that discouraged creativity and material possessions (Mathews and Platt 40). Athens on the other hand created a democracy that was more repetitive in terms of class although it discriminated against women (Mathews and Platt 40). Although every person that was not a slave could participate in government in Athens, women were bared from government participation (Mathews and Platt 40).

The Greek democratic concepts were first passed to the Roman Empire and then to our society today. One common characteristic that I have observed in the development of democracy is a trend whereby democracy first took

root in the empowered ruling class, before spreading to other segments of the society.

For example, in 753 to 509 B. C, a rich council of landowners was the only segment that was allowed to participate in the government; in the Roman Empire at the time. This class elected the roman ruler, and made laws as well (Mathews and Platt 115).

With an increasingly empowered middle class however, things overturned in 509 B. C; when the powerful middle class created a democratic republic (Mathews and Platt, 115). A significant achievement in the Roman democracy was the creation of the separation of powers concept; which was missing in the Greek direct democratic system. Democracy has therefore evolved to create a system of power separation as well as a system that embraces; every member of the society irrespective of race, gender, ethnicity or religion.

While examining whether democracy has failed in a society or not, it is important to examine whether the democratic concepts that have evolved to define democracy as we know it today are wanting.

These concepts include: a truly representative system based on free and transparent elections, a working system of separation of powers and a system that allows every citizen's participation in government without discriminating on gender, race, religion, beliefs or any unjust criteria.

Societies that have failed to successfully transit from autocratic governments to democratic governments have therefore failed to completely embed the

above three concepts of democracy in their system of governments, and their societies.

It can therefore be seen that isolation of a particular segments or segment in a society will automatically hinder democracy (Odhiambo). This isolation could be direct or indirect; but the effect is the same-collapse of democracy.

Indeed, a democratic society is a society that has integrated to desirable levels and is therefore able to direct its energy in unison. According to Lord Acton theory, a society that is truly civilized should struggle to embrace all groups within it to prevent a situation whereby a group or groups in that society develop intolerance towards another group or groups (Odhiambo).

To truly embrace the tenets of democracy, a community therefore needs to find a common denominator that will act as a catalyst for democracy to thrive (Berman, 167). Often times, aristocratic rulers who commonly embed in weak democratic systems exploit disunity in a community to strengthen their powers that they often abuse, as they isolate parts of the community even further. Prime among the factors that discourage integration ins a society include: ethnicity, historical factors, religious differences among others.

According to Lentz, ethnicity in whichever form or magnitude or name is such an important resource in politics and an important parameter in the creation of societies that sociologists and even anthropologists are bound to tackle it (Lentz 310).

George Carew on the other hand stated that the existing relationship of tension between independent African states and ethnicity play to hinder a transition to democratic societies (Odhiambo 267). This has been witnessed in many countries including Kenya, where ethnic tensions have particularly been observed between the community and the state.

In 1992, Kenya experienced clashes between ethnic communities; these clashes were instigated to prevent some communities from participating in oncoming elections during that year (1992) (Muhammad). A notion that has been driving these clashes rests in the belief that; some communities were disregarded in allocation of tracts of fertile land left by British settlers on Independence (Kenya's independence).

Land is not the only resource that has been thought to have been unfairly awarded to some communities in Kenya, in a poor country with limited active resources, government jobs and other sources of opportunities have been exploited to divide the community. This division of the Kenyan community has almost led to the death of the Kenyan state. The Kenyan state recently exploded into unimaginable scale of violence following the controversial presidential elections in 2007 (Muhammad).

Ethnicity has therefore acted to derail the transition to democracy in diverse ways. As has been seen, it can and has led to intolerance tendencies and even violence.

Violent environments are generally antagonistic to democracy. Human rights are normally violated (Darby 243). Besides, formal institutions like the police

that are expected to guard individual rights are normally abused under such. The government becomes volatile and unstable and unreliable, setting the stage for disregard of any established democratic principles (Darby 243).

Moreover, ethnicity prevents a logical election process; where the populace is likely to vote along ethnical lines, instead of considering important attributes of candidates; like their qualifications and their capacity to govern. Ethnicity normally permeates from the highest to the lowest office in a country, where discrimination instead of fairness is the threshold in the provision of services to citizens (Norman).

This creates a society of hate, revenge and other evil elements that prevent integration of communities and therefore prevents democracy (Norman). The Rwandan genocide for example; where hundreds of thousands of people were massacred, is just one of many other tragedy events that have been driven by ethnicity (Muhammad). Ethnicity is therefore not just an enemy to democracy; it is also a proven foe to mankind.

Apart from ethnicity, limitation of a society's integration can arise from historical reasons. A look at the African map ascertains the historical role of western colonial nations. These colonial powers divided the African continent without regarding the need for integration between communities living in the area (Darby 244). The result is a collection of communities that have very little in common and yet; they have been compelled to live together (Darby 244).



Moreover, in order to prevent an uprising from the communities that they had colonized, many colonial powers encouraged disintegration of African communities through the divide and rule strategy (Darby 245). Many African countries made up of different ethnic communities have not been able to completely unite even after attaining independence. Succeeding governments in many countries have continued to exploit disintegration of communities to abuse power, as democratic tenets continue to wear down.

Historical factors come at play to haunt countries like North Korea, where democracy as defined by the concepts that I had described, has failed. In this case, a single community was divided by an existing feud between the United States and Russia. While South Korea emerged as a democratic nation, North Korea has remained as a Communist nation (Darby 250).

North Korea has focused significant energies in combating perceived threat from South Korea as well as from the United states. The focus of energy on South Korea and the United states has denied South Korea the ability to concentrate on issues like poverty among the like; which go hand in hand with democracy (Darby 250).

In this controversy between South Korea and North Korea resulting from historical factors, a scenario exists where North Korea has failed to benefit from Western nations in various ways that could aid its democracy. South Korea on the other hand has been aided by western nations including the United States in the development of its democratic structures and institutions. Historical factors therefore play a role in the future of a country.

This future includes the democratic future of a community. Many communities have not been able to effectively tackle their past in a gainful way that can empower their democracies; to transit from autocratic to democratic societies.

Another key component that has played to water down democracies in the society today is the issue resulting from religious differences (ICPD). Unlike ethnicity, religious differences are potentially more dangerous in destroying democracies and societies.

The evil potential of religions to destroy democracies arises from the fact that; being based on faith, they are able to cut across boundaries, races, ethnic groups and can therefore catalyze evil tendencies across a wider populace than ethnicity (ICPD). Religions determine many aspects in our lives that define our actions; which emanate from; the beliefs that have been passed to us by our religions. Many countries have been hindered from successfully transiting to democracies because of extremist religious beliefs.

Looking at the History of European nations, we can clearly see that; these countries came to a stage where they needed to overcome some extremist religious practices, to successfully transit to democracies (ICPD). Much of autocratic leadership is established on extremist religious beliefs; that are generally used to exploit communities.

One way in which religion has hindered democracy is through the creation of religious wars. Countries like Nigeria have suffered from constant religious wars. Religious conflicts create an environment of violence where democracy

can hardly thrive (Diamond 4). Democratic principles emphasize the respect of human rights; which are often grossly abused during religious conflicts.

Moreover, religious conflicts prevent equal treatment, thus violating an important democratic principle (Diamond 41). Countries like Somalia are governed by groups that believe in Islamic extremism (Muhammad). A group like Al Shabaab has established a government that is not based on any tenet of democracy at all.

The rights and freedoms of people, including common freedoms; like the freedom of movement and communication, are grossly abused by Al Shabaab (Muhammad). It is ironical to note that; Al Shabaab has found supporters; in established democracies like the United States (Muhammad). It is important to note that; Somalia was once a country that was progressing towards a democratic society, before ethnic divisions and Islamic extremism became embedded there (Muhammad).

Many Arabic countries practice some Islamic behaviors that are; directly or indirectly against democratic leadership in general (Bukay). Some of these countries are ruled by non elected leaders, who are also considered to be the religious leaders of their communities (Bukay). Even in countries that have established the representative democratic concept through the ballot, community votes have oftentimes been driven by religion, preventing genuine democracy (Bukay).

Following the September bombing, there has been a temptation to revenge against Muslims and therefore; discriminate them on religious grounds in the

process (Bukay). Some of the laws that have been passed to fight terrorism in the United States as well as in other countries are fundamentally discriminatory (Bukay). The rights of groups from the Islamic communities are therefore likely to be easily abused in countries that; especially lack strong democratic institutions.

Moreover, many Islamic fundamentalists have marketed the United States war on terrorism as; discrimination against Islam. The effect of such an action of portraying the United States and her allies in bad light especially in the Islamic world has resulted in; communities that have been more interested in empathy towards Islamic extremists and possible revenge to the US and her allies, than in the development of democratic institutions. In such kind of scenario, democracy has been weakened.

If we scratch the surface of ethnicity and other parameters that divide our societies, we are likely to find layers of poverty and, fights over economic resources hidden deep therein. It is arguable that democracy and human rights are inseparable (Norman). Democracy thrives hand in hand with human rights (Norman).

An important parameter in the description of human rights includes economic empowerment (Norman). A population that has been empowered to meet its basic and secondary needs is more capable to participate in democratic practices (Norman). Psychologists concur that our behavior is prioritized first, by our biological requirements. The desire to obtain food,

shelter and clothing, form an important composition of our biological requirements (Brewer).

According to psychologists, we are likely to experience stress and be rendered incompetent to participate in other activities in life when we fail to obtain important biological needs (Brewer). Many societies that have not attained democracy, suffer from large scales of want and poverty. Citizens in poor communities are therefore unable to participate in democratic practices.

In many instances, the fight over resources as a result of poverty generally leads to, isolation of population segments. The isolated segments may consist of minorities, or even ethnic groups (Coleman). The rights of isolated segments of the population in poor societies are therefore trampled upon, in the process. In many cases, poverty contributes to low egos and poor self esteem, which directly prevents a person from realizing their capacity in multiple areas including; the capacity to participate in democracy (Coleman).

Such a poor society is less empowered to check the government and, voice its desires to check democratic institutions. In many African countries, politicians have used their wealth to lure and intimidate people to vote for them. The capacity of the population to participate in elections; is thus destroyed, and the notion of democracy remains an illusion.

It therefore becomes extremely difficult, for poor countries to emerge from autocracy to democracy (Diamond). One common denominator that is present in an economically empowered society is an educated society. An

educated society is capable of making wise decisions in regard to democracy, and politics. It is also capable of pressurizing its government to act in a democratic manner (Diamond).

Another challenge closely related to poverty which has acted to prevent a transition to democracy in autocratic society is; corruption. In a way, corruption directly leads to poverty, which has been seen to limit democracy. In many instances, corruption benefits a very small proportion of the population; in powerful offices, and their associates (Comaroff). This may significantly center on ethnical lines; hence perpetuating intolerance in the process.

In a corrupt society, a person is not able to freely obtain services from, what should otherwise be democratic institutions, like the judiciary and the police. An important tenet of democracy-justice; is therefore unavailable. Generally, corruption oppresses a society, by denying them human rights, perpetuating poverty, and increasing the capacity of the political class to abuse their powers. It does not matter what the powerful class do in such a society, since they can always escape justice; through the application of corruption.

There is hardly justice in a society that is endowed with corruption. An institution like the legislature, the executive, and others, can always be compromised in a corrupt society. The capacity of a society that dwells in a corrupt environment, to monitor the government, is therefore eliminated. Countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Kenya and Nigeria, have suffered a setback in the attainment of democracy, because of corruption.

The roman model of democracy, that is applied today, contains not only a representative system of electing the government, but also contains a system of separation of powers (Comaroff). Separation of powers allows a framework whereby, government institutions can prevent one another from abusing their powers (Comaroff).

For a system of power separation to operate in a government, it is important for the government to contain powerful and independent institutions. Since the institution of the Judiciary has been empowered with the power and capacity of making the final decision in most matters that arise in a society, it is a very important office in a democratic society. Most weak democracies lack strong institutions, and are therefore likely to slide easily; into autocratic societies instead of progressing to democracies.

One reason why weak institutions exist in weak democracies is because; such countries contain weak constitutions, which have not been keen enough to enshrine effective separation of powers (Saul). The other major reason is of course is, an open disregard for the provisions of a governing constitution; something common in autocratic societies (Saul).

Addressing the inadequacies of a constitution is therefore an important first stage, in strengthening democratic capacities (Darby 230). In many cases, the constitutions of weak democracies have been repeatedly weakened by; amendments tailored by the ruling class to increase their powers at the expense of the populace (Darby). By weakening their constitution, such societies have slid further; into autocracy.

To prevent the disregard of the constitution by the powerful elite, complementing government institutions especially the judiciary needs to be active. However, in societies that slid into autocracy, these institutions have been weakened by corruption, incompetence of office holders, among other factors.

Most appointees to the judiciary and other important offices are subject to governing rulers; who use them as their puppets. Separation of powers does not therefore exist in these societies (Saul). Even the important institution of conducting elections is often compromised, opening a loophole for election rigging, limiting the democratic capacity of the society in the process (Saul).

Abuse of office by the government in failing democracies has also been accelerated by; weak political parties that commonly exist in these societies (Escobar). Through discrimination, oppression, corruption and application of other methods, the political elite in autocratic societies has endeavored to weaken political parties (Maxwell). Besides, most political parties identify with particular personalities, ethnic communities, religions and the like, instead of identifying with particular ideologies (Maxwell).

Moreover, political parties in autocratic societies lack a transparent system that can allow internal democracies (Escobar). It is therefore almost impossible for new ideologies and personalities independent from party controllers, to emerge in the political landscape of such societies (Coleman 250). The result of such a system is; the possible recycling of old autocratic



ideologies and personalities, hence preventing a transition to democracy in the process (Coleman 250).

In a society where the capacity of citizens to elect their leaders has been compromised and important institutions like the judiciary have been also compromised, the remaining tool that can push such a society back to democracy is the civil society, and possibly pressure from the international community (Hyden). Civil groups in many weak democracies are; either weak or are, commonly intimidated by the government.

By preventing the active role that should proceed from civil groups, the remaining internal voice of democratization is weakened (Hyden). In a country like Zimbabwe, several members of civil groups have been murdered or tortured by the government (Hyden). Quenching civil groups by the use of threats, torture, murder and other inhuman means illustrates how a government has progressed; deeply into autocratic principles. The last shreds of democracy are becoming rare.

This is where the international community, apart from a rare miracle, becomes the only hope for such a society to move towards democracy again. In many cases, the role of the international community has been discouraging, as much as it has tried to help (Huntigton).

Countries like South Africa have remained quiet, even when their Zimbabwe neighbor has been practicing blatant autocracy. Several factors including economic ties, foreign policies, among others have played to water down the needed international pressure, which is desperately required to push

autocratic countries back onto the democratic lane (Huntington). Indeed, conscious, as well as unconscious practices, by the international community have acted to discourage some democracies.

Many countries continue to relate, and even fund countries that are sliding into autocracy (Huntington). Moreover, it is commonly known that; some western powers have installed puppet governments that practice autocracy, and helped to build multinational companies; that exploit some societies, leading to abuse of human rights and, aggravating poverty (Haynes).

Unfair trading relations and ineffective aid have acted to drown many societies into autocracy in significant ways (Haynes). Many countries have a selfish foreign policy, which trudges on the wellbeing of other societies, most of which have struggling democracies (Haynes). In general, the international community has been ineffective in nurturing democracies (Haynes). Weak democracies that have not been stimulated by the international community have therefore found it easier to slide into autocratic societies.

Although the development of democratic societies is an ideal goal, it is a difficult task to achieve. Democracies in America, Europe and other areas have been built on constant struggles, betrayals, sweat, and blood.

Democratization will remain a difficult task because of ingrained interests by powerful groups that; are not willing to let go of their powers, status, greed and wealth.

A lot of internal and external sacrifice is therefore needed for a democracy to mature. Many emerging democracies have been taking longer than expected

to establish their democracies; if not sliding back into autocracy. The onus is therefore on such societies and the international community to make the necessary efforts on their part; so that democracy is nurtured, to avoid the imminent destruction of weak democracies; sliding fast into autocracy

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