

DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY AND THE PUBLIC WILL FORMATION: TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE DEMOCRATIC MODEL FOR AFRICA

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Abstract

Democracy as a political system has over the years enjoyed a wide and progressive acceptance as an effective form of political structure which provides enabling environment for nourishing of the basics of human flourishing. It has found manifestation in different forms and designs in various cultures, without undermining the basic operational principles that are generally regarded as distinctive elements of a democratic order. The implication, therefore, is that almost all societies of the world have some forms of democratic credentials. The consensus principle of decision making through deliberative and participatory engagements remain a remarkable feature of democratic practice in traditional African society. This principle of reaching decision and forming the public will was the traditional method of considering all shades of opinions in the process of building consensus that will guarantee a rancour-free and public-spirited decision in the non-party structure of the traditional African society. With the adoption of western liberal democratic practice, the traditional African method of decision making through consensus principle is now threatened, and with the sustained influence of neoliberal ideologies and majoritarianism, the principle of liberal democratic practice in Africa is facing a huge challenge of consolidation. This paper, therefore, engages expository, historical and critical-evaluative methods to systematically lay bare the issues, historically locate the evolution and transformation of traditional African society and critically interrogate the concept of deliberative democracy and public formation in view of advancing an alternative model for democratic practice in contemporary Africa.

Keywords: Africa, Democracy, Public Will Formation.

Introduction

In line with the contemporary wave of democratization across the globe as the best political system, almost all states in post-colonial Africa are gravitating towards democratic practice. Since its invention in the ancient Greece, democracy as a system of government has evolved steadily to the level where there is seemingly a global consensus that it is the most preferred system of political organisation with inherent operational principles that guarantee basic goods of human well-being and development. In this regard, democracy has become not just fashionable but the most attractive political system in recent times. Without underrating its shortcomings as highlighted by Plato and the likes, the gains of a democratic system are globally acknowledged and evidenced wherever it is practiced in line with its ontological principles.

Democracy has been acculturated in different parts of the world for effective practice and sustainability. Consequently, there are different forms and modes of democratic practice around the world. Each of the democratic models is often fashioned in compatibility with the history, culture, tradition and sometimes the religious orientation of the society in question. This fact appears to have eluded the democratisation process in Africa where there is a general tendency towards unwholesome transfer of western model of democratic practice without a consideration of the specificities of African societies. As such, the resulting democratisation process is largely externally generated, and has not taken full cognizance of the internal cultural dynamics of societies in which these changes are being introduced. In fact, the multiparty system as also the party system itself is inhospitable to the consensual values of traditional Society.¹

As a result, there is a noticeable difficulty of democratic consolidation generally on the African continent. This is without prejudice to the gains and growth in this regard being experienced in some countries on the continent. But on a general note, most African countries are virtually struggling to deepen democratic practice.

This paper seeks to argue that, democratic practice can only be consolidated in Africa if it is modelled after the pre-colonial discursive political system in most African societies which offers better prospects of democratic consolidation in Africa, because of its deliberative nature towards the formation of public position and decision making. The traditional process of consensus-building in decision making was implicitly and sometimes explicitly revealing of the democratic credentials of traditional African societies. Describing the reality of consensus

¹Edward Wamala. "Government by Consensus: An Analysis of a Traditional Form of democracy" in Kwasi Wiredu (Ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*.

<http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/uid=/tocnode?id=g978..> Accessed 20/10/2016.

governance in traditional African societies, Edward Wamala in reference to Ganda society, notes that:

...seeking consensus in traditional Ganda societies seems to have been more simply a political expedient to avoid legitimization crisis, it seems to have been at the heart of social and political organisation and the ethos of the people... the dedication of consensus seems to have been rooted in the firm and epistemological belief that, knowledge is ultimately dialogical or social, and in the ethical belief in the collective responsibility of all for the welfare of the community.²

The quotation above corroborates the fact of deliberative and discursive form of governance in pre-colonial African societies. As such, the concept of deliberative democracy as presently conceptualized by western thinkers, like Jurgen Habermas, is not strange or alien to traditional African societies. According to Ukoro Theophilus Igwe, “as a matter of fact Habermas’ elaborate theory of communicative action is intended to show how communicative rationality is itself built into the very structure of the human inter-subjectivity,”³ and how communicative reason operates in history as an avenging force.⁴ This goes to show the inherent benefits of discussion and the reality of social and dialogical governance in most traditional societies.

This paper, therefore, seeks to interrogate the concept of deliberative democracy and public will formation and to further demonstrate the compatibility of this democratic model to traditional African political organisation.

The Concepts of Deliberative Democracy and Public Will Formation

In recent times, democracy, as a political system is experiencing a dynamic reconceptualisation based chiefly on the idea of deliberative democracy as the most representative and participatory form of democracy in public will, which is formed through robust deliberation by informed citizenry. This form of democracy is rooted in the idea of direct democracy reminiscent of ancient Athenian democracy, and this renewed interest and perspective has articulated a thematic issue that has galvanized the theoretical and analytical efforts of a wide range of social and political thinkers all over the world. The collective aspiration is to configure a democratic theory, which is referred to as the deliberative strand of democracy, given that its distinctive trait is the emphasis placed on the deliberative, argumentative and participatory elements of the democratic process. Its key

²Wamala. “Government by Consensus: An Analysis of a Traditional Form of democracy”

operational principle “rests on the idea of open participation of all section of a given society”.³

The concept of will-formation, on the other hand, is closely tied to the idea of popular sovereignty which core element is the power of the people to confer legitimacy in the exercise of political power by freely offering their consent in that regard. The idea of public-will formation emphasises the character of process and continual praxis of citizens in framing a collective course of action⁴. The central argument is that collective choices should be discursive or deliberative and not simply preferences⁵. It is regarded as the process of reshaping preferences. In this regard, Cohen notes that, “Assuming a commitment to deliberative justification, the discovery that I can offer no persuasive reasons on behalf of a proposal of mine may transform the preferences that motivate the proposal”.⁶ It is found to be the best democratic approach in complex and pluralistic societies. And it is only through deliberative democracy that public-will formation can be guaranteed, hence the renewed interest in it as an alternative model for nation-states in Africa.

The revival of this idea of democracy whose centrepiece is argumentation and deliberation is a reaction to other theories of democracy dominant during the second half of the twentieth century. This model of democratic practice seeks to generate public will through thoughtful, robust citizen engagement and discussion. According to Leonardo Avritzer, “deliberative democracy is a critique of the aggregative view of democracy that dominated post-war democratic theory. Instead of aggregation through elections, deliberative democracy proposes different forms of improving the quality of the democracy through public reasoning and argumentation”.⁷ It is generally regarded as a normative political theory, because it espouses how political practice should occur, rather than offering an explanatory model. Deliberative democracy aspires to an ideal in which people make judgments about controversial issues of public concern by moving beyond their narrow self-interests and to engage one another in reasoned deliberation to consider what is in the common good and public interest. It is in this respect that:

³S. Wing “Constructing Democracy in Transitioning Societies of Africa: Constitutionalism and Deliberation” in Mali. Springer, 28, April, (2008), 78.

⁴Kerstin Jacobson. “Discursive Will Formation and the Question of Legitimacy in European Politics” in Scandinavian Political Studies, Bind 20 (New Series) (1997),.2

⁵Cohen Joshua. “Deliberative and Democratic Legitimacy” in Hanlin. A & (Ed.), The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State. 9 Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 22.

⁶Cohen Joshua. “Deliberative and Democratic Legitimacy” In Hanlin. A & Pettit. P (eds), The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State. 24

⁷Leonardo Avritzer. “Democracy Beyond Public Aggregation: The Participatory Dimension of Public Deliberation” In Journal of Public Deliberation, Vol..8. Issue 2, Article 10., (2012), 1.

Deliberative democrats have urged that democracy be thought of as crucially involving the exchange of reasons. Participants in the democratic process should aim at a result that reflects not the balance of contending forces and political skills but the force of the better argument...Reasons are seen as excluding the naked expression of individual or group interests, taken simply as such.⁸

According to Elaine Santos, deliberative democracy is a field of political inquiry that is concerned with improving collective decision making. It emphasises the right, opportunity and capacity of anyone who is subject to a collective decision to participate (or have their representatives participate) in consequential deliberation about that decision.⁹ In other words every citizen is expected to have a say on issues of public concern. Deliberative democracy is supposed to change positions (not in every case, but at the least there is some kind of mutual accommodation.) What we know from actually observing deliberation in practice is that, insofar as we can create these ideal kinds of conditions, there is indeed a good deal of change to the positions of individuals.

On his part, J Elster postulates that, deliberative democracy is a normative ideal of democracy and the adjective ‘deliberative’ attached to democracy refers to a particular way of decision-making based on argumentation or deliberation, as opposed to bargaining and voting.¹⁰ As a democratic ideal, deliberative democracy aims for the inclusion of all those (potentially) affected by a decision in the very process of decision-making, recognizing in each an equal capacity for them to influence the final decision.¹¹ In a deliberative arrangement, political decisions are to be made through a collective procedure of argumentation, where arguing consists in exchanging reasons for or against certain proposals oriented to the goal of rationally convincing others, instead of strategic participation oriented to impose on others personal political preferences or desires; and it is supposed to lead at least ideally to rational consensus. It is in this respect that:

Deliberative democrats have also urged that participation in the democratic process should be civic minded rather than “privatistic”. That is, participants should not enter the democratic arena with a fully formed conception of position they will ultimately pursue. They should allow themselves to be swayed by the

⁸Daniel Weinstock, David Kahane, et al. *Deliberative Democracy in Practice*. Vancouver, (The University of British Columbia, UBC Press, 2010), 2.

⁹Elaine Santos. “What is Deliberative Democracy?”

<http://deldem.weblogs.anu.edu.au/2012/02/15/what-is-deliberative-de>. Accessed 10/17/2016.

¹⁰Elster J. *Deliberative Democracy*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 239

¹¹Bohman, J. *Democracy Across Borders*. (Cambridge: MIT Press. 2007), 199.

arguments of others and attempt to view the political agenda from a vantage point that encompasses the interests of all.¹²

As such, deliberative democracy is also seen as a discursive process based on reason where deliberation assumes both the existence of rightness (or impartiality or some other equivalent) in political decisions and the possibility to know which is the right (or impartial decision).¹³

Joshua Cohen, in his *Deliberation and democratic legitimacy*, sees the notion of a deliberative democracy as rooted in the intuitive ideal of an association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens. According to him, citizens in such an order share a commitment to the resolution of problems of collective choice through public reasoning, and regard their basic institutions as legitimate in so far as they establish the framework for free public deliberation.¹⁴ From the above, deliberative democracy is a pluralistic association in which the members have diverse preferences, convictions and ideals concerning the conduct of their own lives. While sharing a commitment to the deliberative resolution, some particular set of preferences, convictions or ideals are mandatory because the members of a democratic association regard deliberative procedures as the source of legitimacy. They prefer institutions in which the connections between deliberation and outcomes are evident to one in which the connections are less clear. The members recognize one another as having deliberative capacities i.e. the capacities required for entering into a public exchange of reasons and for acting on the result of such public reasoning. Cohen supports a wider ranging notion of deliberative democracy, distinguishing it not only because of its emphasis on discussion, as opposed to voting or bargaining as decision-making methods. For him, what distinguishes a deliberative conception of democracy is that it offers a model for political justification which "ties the exercise of power to free reasoning among equals. This in turn implies that, the results will be considered legitimate "if and only if they could be the object of a free and reasoned agreement among equals."¹⁵ It can be stated that, the ideal deliberative procedure proposed by Cohen has the following principal characteristics: (a) the discursive dimension; (b) the

¹²Daniel Weinstock, David Kahane, et al. *Deliberative Democracy in Practice*, 2.

¹³Bohman, J. *Democracy Across Borders*. (Cambridge: MIT Press. 2007), 199.

¹⁴Cohen Joshua. "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy" in Hamlin, A, Pettit, P. (eds.) *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*. (Oxford. Basil: Blackwell, 1989), 54.

¹⁵Cohen Joshua. "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy" in Hamlin, A, Pettit, P. (eds.) *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*, 193.

requirements of equality and freedom; (c) the criteria of reasoning; and (d) the idea that deliberative procedure leads to the common good.¹⁶

Cohen's thoughts corroborate those of other exponents of deliberative democracy who held that, the discursive dimension is the foundation for all other features of the deliberative conception of democracy. It seeks to uphold the importance of free public sphere, separate from the apparatus of the state where there is a free deliberation by citizens and can collective democratic will-formation can be engaged in. In a deliberative democracy, discussions, debate and the exchange of arguments, are the means by which citizens evaluate the conditions of their association and try to solve collective problems. According to Habermas, without public discussions in which mutual understanding of key issues and needs is achieved, the democratic process and by extension, the legitimacy of the political system will fail.¹⁷ In this respect, Cohen maintains that, a deliberative procedure occurs in conditions of equality when the political agenda is not dominated by privileged groups in control of resources, when economic and social power is not converted into political power or in differentiated opportunities in the political arena and when the principle of political equality ascribes equal value to all those engaged.¹⁸ According to the model proposed by Cohen, citizens deliberate in conditions of freedom when they do not face external or internal constraints to the autonomous expression of their preferences. Freed from constraints (except for those established by the framework that defines the deliberative procedure), citizen commit themselves to the results they reached through deliberation, and offer reasons that support their proposals.

Following the same thought pattern, Freeman, in his article *Deliberative Democracy: A Sympathetic comment*, posits that, deliberative democracy is an idealized system in which citizens deliberate before voting and try to make thoughtful judgments for the collective good¹⁹. These citizens, Freeman argues must be free and equal and must operate within a political system that guarantees basic rights, and within a social life that provides them with basic resources. He acknowledged that people are diverse and may form their own ideas about what is in the common good, but they must provide supporting evidence that reasonable

¹⁶Cohen Joshua. "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy" in Hamlin, A, Pettit, P. (eds.) *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*, 193.

¹⁷Habermas, J. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Trans. William R. Hohmann-Light. Cambridge M.A: MIT Press, 1996. P.34.

¹⁸Cohen Joshua. "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy" in Hamlin, A, Pettit, P. (eds.) *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*, 192.

¹⁹Freeman, Samuel "Deliberative Democracy: A Sympathetic Comment" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. 2000, P.25.

people can understand.²⁰ What this view supposes is that, deliberative democracy acts as a vehicle to realize a shared public life and civic engagement through a process of moral and mutual reason giving. It offers a way of getting citizens and multiple stakeholders to discuss different views and ideologies that shape and transform opinions, correct misperceptions, and differentiate between interests geared toward the common good and merely self-interested agenda. Deliberation encourages mutual respect and reciprocal accountability, thus motivating participants to eliminate irrational and self-focused opinions to generate a "moralizing effect of public discussion."

Furthermore, James Fishkin, in his contribution to the discourse on the concept of deliberative democracy, focuses on the kinds of institutions required for the ideal of deliberative democracy to be realized in large-scale and technologically advanced societies. He insists that such institutions must embody both political equality and deliberation. In his book *Democracy and Deliberation* and, more at length, in *The Voice of the People*, he defends an institutional design based on the model of the deliberative opinion poll, but also alludes to other institutional designs that embody both political equality and deliberation, such as the proposal of Philippe Schmitter and Claus Offe to give every citizen a "representation voucher" and Bruce Ackerman's notion of a "constitutional moment".²¹

Fishkin maintained that, the advantage of a deliberative opinion poll over non-deliberative or instant forms of polling is that it enables a representative sample of citizens to acquire an adequate level of information on a given issue, to listen to the contrasting opinions and perspectives of experts, and to test their own views and opinions through a process of common debate and discussion. The results of a deliberative poll provide in this respect, "a statistical model of what the electorate would think if, hypothetically, all voters had the same opportunities that are offered to the sample in the deliberative opinion poll".²² Such opinion polls are a reflection of people's wishes and are prescriptive in character: "Its results have prescriptive force because they are the voice of the people under special conditions where the people have had a chance to think about the issues and hence should have a voice worth listening to"²³. The thematic preoccupation of deliberative opinion polls is to allow people to engage in a reasoned debate and to find some common ground on disputed moral, political or ethical questions by operating in a framework

²⁰Samuel "Deliberative Democracy: A Sympathetic Comment" in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 25.

²¹Samuel "Deliberative Democracy", 25.

²²Samuel "Deliberative Democracy", 25.

²³Samuel "Deliberative Democracy", 25.

characterized by political equality, participation and non-tyranny. Fishkin stressed that:

A collective process (of deliberation) occurs in which the group has a reasonable chance to form its collective, considered judgments - to give its public voice, if you will, to the topic in question. Arguments on rival positions get an extended hearing, and each side has a chance to answer the other. The same information is available to all. People are present and engaged by the process. They do not merely listen. They also participate, in a context which is small enough that each can credibly believe that his or her individual voice counts. And they discuss the issues in an atmosphere of mutual respect, attempting to find common ground.²⁴

So, it can be said, therefore, that in deliberative democracy, there is a strong nexus between communication and legitimacy. It upholds the value of robust public engagement in building consensus and compromise on issues of public interest for the realisation of the common good. It seeks to emphasise the centrality of listening to all shades of opinion from citizens in the process of forming the general will. In this respect, it encourages active participation from all citizens. According to Daniel Weinstock, *et al* “deliberative democrats tend to advocate an active conception of citizenship, whereby democratic politics is not the sole preserve of elites”.²⁵ This position is canvassed based on the thinking that beyond whether there is the intrinsic good served by participation, “the legitimation and justification of policies requires deliberation reaching beyond traditional elite circles”.²⁶ It is the thinking of deliberative democrats that open debate and consensus agreement are critical elements in the building of public will that will be best suited to the governance of diverse peoples and pluralistic socio-political configuration, like the case in African societies. Hence, the imperative of systematic dialogue and deliberation as critical ingredients for a more inclusive and just form of liberal society which is envisaged in a deliberative democratic arrangement.

Deliberative Democracy and the Search for an Alternative Democratic Model for Africa

It has become imperative to evolve a democratic model that suits the African socio-political and religio-cultural specificity. This need for African states to evolve their own home-grown brand of democracy that is consistent with and peculiar to their daily needs and in line with their communalistic approach towards reaching

²⁴Fishkin James S. *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*. New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1991, 19

²⁵Daniel Weinstock, *et al*. *Deliberative Democracy in Practice*, 2.

²⁶Daniel Weinstock, *et al*. *Deliberative Democracy in Practice*, 2.

reasonable consensus on issues that bother on governance and their day to day living is in response to the renewed crave to provide a democratic practice that is culturally rooted in and compatible with the African way of life. Although many African political scholars and politicians have expressed reservation on the possibility of such because of the huge influence of westernisation on their thoughts and orientation, a good number of progressive thinkers “have in recent times seen the need for the utilisation of Africa’s democratic heritage and values, rooted in her traditional past in resolving her peculiar problems”.²⁷

This is even more so that liberal democracy, as inherited and adopted from the West, has done the African states more harm than good. Wambiadia Wamba corroborates this view when he posited, in his *Distinction between democracy in Africa and democracy for Africa*, that, since the inception of democratisation in Africa, Africans have nurtured the culture of consuming what others (the West) have articulated for them on democracy. He rejects the view that democratisation of Africa consists of imposing western parliamentarianism upon the continent. He is of the view that western multiparty system is unsuitable for the African situation. For him, one cannot democratize Africa by imposing the western democratic system on the African situation from the top.²⁸ On the contrary, he advocates for a democracy from below. Here, the concept of self-responsibilisation plays a key role. For him, democracy in Africa must be seen primarily not as a mode of politics, but must rather be viewed as a process of emancipation, self-determination and the meeting of the needs of the people. According to him:

Democratisation has to be considered as a process of struggle to win, defend and protect rights of people and individuals against one sidedness including the right of self-organisation for autonomy and not necessarily right of participation in the state process.²⁹

The implication of the above is the fact that, the western practice of democracy is not suitable for the practice of democracy in Africa, owing to the fact that. African democracy was traditionally discursive and consensual in nature. It allows for individual participation in the collective decision making, instead of imposing on citizens’ decisions about policies of government. Hence, the need for a consensual

²⁷Ademola Kazeem Fayemi. “Towards an African Theory of Democracy”. In *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)* Premier Issue, New Series, Vol.1, June (2009): 102.

²⁸Wamba, Ernest Wambia dia. “Democracy in Africa and Democracy for Africa”. Kimmerle, Heinz and Fraz M. Wimmer (eds.) *Philosophy and Democracy in intercultural perspective*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1990, 129.

²⁹Wamba, Ernest Wambia dia. “Democracy in Africa and Democracy for Africa”. 129.

or deliberative form of democracy for Africa, as an alternative model for democratic sustainability on the African continent.

According to Moshi and Osman, liberal democracy failed in many parts of Africa mainly because the western political parties aggregate primarily along class interest, whereas in most African communities, established class system is mainly absent. Thus, contemporary western insistence on multiparty politics is not considered in traditional African lenses as an indigenous cultural value. This is even so that in most cases, multiparty electoral politics does degenerate into ethnic or communal conflicts. Edward Wamala observed that:

Multiparty politics, although conceivably good for alternative policy advancement in individualistic societies, has tended to be very problematic in communalistic societies. The challenge then is: how can societies, in which consensus was traditionally, the preferred method of political decision-making, institutionalise democracy in the modern world? The creative answer to this type of question can save contemporary Africa the headache otherwise caused when ideas are adopted without adequate consideration.³⁰

Moreover, in view of Africa's complex problems where, because of lack of a consensual norm on democracy, coupled with insufficient political pressure from the African society, political regimes tend to pay less attention to elite abuse, fears of majoritarian tyranny and corruption. Hence, the urge for a resurgence of African indigenous democracy.³¹ Deducible from the above is the call for a brand of democracy which is African oriented, a democracy which is peculiar to the Africans and also takes into cognizance the spatial-temporal realities of the African, societies and which also responds to the immediate needs and challenges in Africa with particular attention to majoritarianism (in the context of majority and minority ethnic dichotomy), marginalisation of the minority ethnic groups by the majority and ethnic hegemony. It has been observed that if the process of decision making in traditional African life and governance which was deliberative and consensual is adopted, it will go a long way to address the challenges highlighted above.

The idea of public-will-formation, on the other hand, is also considered here as being critical towards an alternative democratic model for Africa, because like deliberative democracy, public-will-formation provides opportunities for citizens to bring forward their thoughts and ideas and sample them in a deliberative manner

³⁰Edward Wamala. "Government by Consensus: An Analysis of a Traditional Form of democracy" in Kwasi Wiredu ed. *A Companion to African Philosophy*. .7.

³¹Ademola Kazeem Fayemi. "Towards an African Theory of Democracy". In *Thought and Practice: A Journal of the Philosophical Association of Kenya (PAK)*,13.

so as to reach a consensus on issues that bother on governance. According to Edward Wamala:

The dedication to consensus seems to have been rooted in the firm epistemological belief that knowledge is ultimately dialogical or social and in the ethical belief in the collective responsibility of all for the welfare of the community.³²

This way of addressing issues has been with the Africans for ages, since the African societies are traditionally and deeply rooted in communalism, as evident in their approach towards reaching agreements on very vital issues that affect their common wellbeing. Wamala further observes that “western theorists like Jurgen Habermas, who today talk of the social or dialogical nature of knowledge, are only restating an old truth since discovered and lived in traditional Ganda Society.”³³ However, it is worthy of note that, not all decisions reached by citizens under a deliberative atmosphere are logically correct or right, but since the decisions are not imposed on the citizens by any force of government, or they are not coerced into accepting such decisions, they collectively accept and shoulder the consequences and burdens of their consensus. As such, it is logically persuasive to advocate for deliberative democracy through public-will-formation as an alternative democratic idea for Africa. This is even more compelling because other forms of democracy have proven abortive in tackling or solving the current challenges of the African states over the ages. Almost all other forms of democratic model experimented in Africa so far have proven to be either elitist, built around class division or majoritarianism, involving the marginalisation of minority ethnic groups within the African states by the majority ethnic groups thereby fueling the sustained cries of marginalisation from certain disadvantaged segments of the African societies.

It is in line with the above that Kwasi Wiredu submits that, Africa’s political salvation cannot come from the presently known model of majoritarian democracy which African states are currently practicing. Majoritarian democracy involves a multiparty system of politics, in which the party that wins the majority of lawful votes cast in an election forms the government. In such a political set-up, the losing party or parties become the opposition, singly or jointly. In this system, the votes of the minority representatives are overridden by those of the majority. The implication is that the right of the minority representatives and their constituencies to meaningfully participate in the actual making of decisions is rendered nugatory.

³²Edward Wamala. “Government by Consensus: An Analysis of a Traditional Form of democracy” in Kwasi Wiredu (Ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*, 3.

³³Edward Wamala. “Government by Consensus: An Analysis of a Traditional Form of democracy” in Kwasi Wiredu (Ed.) *A Companion to African Philosophy*, 3.

In many contemporary African states, certain ethnic groups and political parties have found themselves perpetually in the minority, consistently staged outside the corridor of power. Not only this, their fundamental human rights of decisional representation are permanently denied with impunity. There is usually a disposition of arrogance on the part of the majority who in most cases activate the tyranny of the majority to silence the voices of the minority with the popular saying that “the majority carries the votes” without any consideration for the feelings of those in the minority. The worst part of it is that the majority advantage is not garnered based on any ideological mobilization, but simply and most often on ethno-religious and sectional basis. Many scholars feel that the rights of the minority are often violated by this approach. This reality, according to Wiredu, is one of the most persistent causes of political instability in Africa. Consequently, in an attempt to provide a way out of this serious deficiency of majoritarian democracy in Africa, Wiredu explores the resonance of a non-party and consensual democracy in forestalling many of the socio-political ills in Africa:

A non-party and consensual democratic system is one in which parties are not the basis of power. People can form political associations to propagate their political ideas and help to elect representatives to parliament. But an association having the most elected members will not therefore be the governing group. Every representative will be of the government in his personal, rather than associational capacity.³⁴

It is intriguing to deduce from Wiredu’s argument the imperativeness of considering the individual’s personal views, before all important decisions are made on the principle of consensus. This process of deliberation on issues rather than resorting to popular vote is, according to Wiredu, capable of promoting mutual tolerance, thereby contributing to de-marginalization in a polity which has been the bane of democratic harmony in most African states. Wiredu uses the example of the traditional Akan political system to illustrate the plausibility of this approach. The need for a deliberative democracy in Africa is very central, owing to the fact that it is pluralistic in nature. If everything about governance and the distribution of political power, wealth and resources of any African state is deliberated upon, there will be less tension between the minority and majority ethnic groups, because as it stands at the moment, there is high level of marginalisation of the minority ethnic groups, not because such ethnic groups do not have the political parties that vie for political offices in the African states, but because other majority groups see them

³⁴Kwasi Wiredu. *Cultural Universals and Particulars*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, 179.

as very insignificant in terms of number, and this has generated problems. According to Wiredu:

One of the most persistent causes of political instability in Africa derives from the fact that, in ever so many contemporary African states, certain ethnic groups have found themselves in the minority both numerically and politically. Under a system of majoritarian democracy this means that, even with all the safeguards, they will consistently find themselves outside the corridors of power. The frustrations and disaffections with their disruptive consequences for the polity, should not have caught anybody by surprise.³⁵

The sustainable way out of the challenge highlighted above, hence is the need for a deliberative democracy as an alternative model of democratic consolidation in Africa. This is because deliberative democracy finds relevance here as it rejects the politics of marginalisation of minority tribes, majoritarianism and ethnic hegemony, thereby upholding and promoting equality of ethnic groups as this will go a long way in bridging the gap that exists between the majority and the minority in the distribution of political and economic resources of the African states.

Here, we find very instructive and supportive the contribution of Jurgen Habermas, particularly in articulating a systematic notion of deliberative democracy where he facilitated the rise of discursive public will formation and encouraged communicative rationality. His conceptualisation of the public sphere is considered to be advantageous and imperative for multicultural societies such as Africa, and is specifically beneficial to minority or marginalized groups. A democracy without public deliberation leaves the minorities with little or no chances of actualising their political ambitions; but by participating in the formation of public opinion, they stand a chance to be heard and considered for political positions. This model is envisaged to empower the disadvantaged through participating in a public debate that can transform the pre-existing assumptions held by members of the larger society about what is right and fair for these groups. If democracy is to help promote justice for these groups rather than leaving them subject to the ‘tyranny of the majority’ as noted above, then democracy will have to be more deliberative.

Critical observation has empirically revealed that consensual approach of traditional African societies remains a promising solution to the problems posed by liberal democratic principles and seems to be the only way out of the democratic paradox in Africa. Deliberative democracy is not only democratic in nature, but it

³⁵Kwasi Wiredu. “Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for Non-party polity”. Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy 2 (2000).
<http://them.polylog.org/2/fwk.en.htm>. Accessed 20/10/2019, 8

also guarantees the participation of every individual in almost all political decisions since it is discussion oriented. Bingu wa Mutharika corroborates this view when he opined that, “an important aspect of political accountability which the African traditional society has handed down from generation to generation is the sanctity of dialogue”³⁶. This deliberative model promises to solve the problem created by the majoritarian principle of liberal democracy, where there is an intrinsic challenge of reconciling the interests and aspirations of the majority with the minority. Hence, seen in this light, deliberative democracy in Africa would guarantee political participation of the minority, since it is discussion-oriented. Besides political participation being guaranteed for the minorities, deliberative democracy also solves the modern controversial issue of human rights which must always be guaranteed in any modern political society. Human rights, under consensus, are taken into cognizance, especially the rights of the minority that are undermined in a system of majoritarian liberal democracy. This is because in a deliberative and consensual arrangement, all interests, no matter how small are given equal consideration in the process of building consensus, so that no segment of the society will feel underrated or marginalised. In juxtaposing majority rule of liberal democracy with consensual democracy in traditional African societies in respect to the interests and rights of the minorities, Wiredu noted that in traditional African societies:

All decisions of the council were based on consensus. The elders would keep on discussing an issue till consensus was reached, a method that contrast with the decision by majority vote that prevails in modern democracies. The rationale of decision by consensus as can be inferred was to forestall the trivialization of the right of the minority to have an effect on decision.³⁷

Thus, deliberative democracy is important in putting the rights of all to the fore, unlike in modern liberal democracy, where the rights of the majority often overwhelm the minority. But with a consensual arrangement, all interests and divergent political views are negotiated and reconciled, without overlooking any segment no matter its seeming insignificance.

However, it is pertinent to note that in a complex and pluralistic society, like ours, disagreements, differences and divergent social and political opinions will surely arise, chiefly because of different backgrounds and ideological subscription for socio-political and religio-economic gains. Again, it is important

³⁶Mutharika, B. *One Africa, One Destiny: Towards Democracy, Good Governance and Development*.
Harare: S.A.P.E.S Trust, 1995, 9.

³⁷Kwasi Wiredu. *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 16.

to note that consensus does not always imply agreement on all issues, but compromise among different parties who at the end of the day agree or reconcile, knowing fully that their points of view have been taken seriously. In this regard, Eze contends that every party is a government party and the principle of governance should be the reconciliation of competing social interests. As such, reconciliation, agreement, consensus (and not the rule of the majority) should make up the political axiom.³⁸

In context of the present democratic arrangement, it is a fact that there exist different divergent political ideologies between politicians and legislators, based on party lines in almost all nation-states; but still in most situations, decisions are based on consensual agreement on issues of grave public concern. According to Wiredu, consensus was taken as a basis of joint action and was taken axiomatically³⁹. He further notes that “Consensus is not just an optional bonus...it is essential for securing substantive, or what might also be called decisional, representation for representatives and through them, for the citizens at large”⁴⁰. Wiredu further posits that:

Consensus as a political decision procedure requires, in principle, that each representative should be persuaded, if not of the optimality of each decision, at least of its practical necessity, all things considered. If discussion has been even moderately rational and the spirit has been one of respectful accommodation on all sides, surviving reservations on the part of a momentary minority will not prevent the recognition that, if the community is to go forward, a particular line of action must be taken.⁴¹

As such, despite noticeable challenges in building consensus and forming a public will that is reflective of the public and common interest, deliberation in a democratic system of governance appears seemingly more suitable and better for the pluralistic African nation- states. It promises to be the most tenable, sustainable and inclusive model that will practically address the challenges of liberal and majoritarian democracy in Africa, as an effective way out of the current democratic paradox.

³⁸Eze, E. C. *Post-Colonial African Philosophy: A Critical Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997. P.315.

³⁹Kwasi Wiredu. *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 303.

⁴⁰Kwasi Wiredu. “Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for Non-party polity”. *Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy*, 9.

⁴¹Wiredu. “Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics”, 9.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, this paper has given reasoned justifications for the need for Africa to evolve its own brand of democratic practice that is consistent with the African thought system and socio-cultural orientation; a democracy which will be characterized by communalism and active participation through deliberative engagement typical of traditional African set-up. This paper, therefore, argues that the imperative way towards democratic consolidation in Africa is the adoption of a deliberative and discursive model of democracy which usually creates a platform for all shades of opinions to be heard and interrogated towards building consensus and public will-formation. So far, the liberal democratic practice has proven to be culturally inappropriate and alien to, not only African politico-existential experiences, but is also eccentric to the conception of the human person that is found in Africa where the individual being is always seen from a communitarian perspective; rather than the individually existing ontological being with only *reason*, *will* and *desire* which is dominant in the operational ideology of western thought system. We, therefore, recommend the practice of deliberative and consensual democracy, owing chiefly to its compatibility with African socio-political configuration, culture and history. This is even compelling because most traditional African societies are basically communitarian in nature and that decision making in these societies is by consensus.⁴²

⁴² Wiredu. "Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics", 9.

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