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Western Democracy and the Promise of Development in Africa: The Grand Deception?

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Abstract

The paper examined how the conflation of political independence with socio-economic development has shaped Africa's post-colonial experience. Drawing on a systematic literature review of 46 purposively selected secondary sources and applying thematic textual analysis with a neocolonialism theoretical frame, the paper argues that after independence there was a widespread hope that it would usher Africa into rapid development if Africa accepted Western democracy. However, this this optimism has faded as African nations continue to grapple with persistent underdevelopment, pervasive poverty, and entrenched systemic inequality. It discusses how colonial democratic models, as advocated by Western countries, often failed to address Africa's historical realities and developmental needs. It calls for rethinking of externally imposed democratic ideals and developing context-driven African models.

Keywords: *Development, Africa, Colonialism, Western democracy, Neocolonialism*

1.1. Introduction

Between the 1950s and 1960s, Africa was engaged in political development that completely changed the history of the continent. The impact of this political change was felt throughout the world, and it

produced new independent African states. When this development took place, it tended to reshape all other African affairs. Historians have called this process decolonisation. In simple terms, therefore, decolonisation was the process whereby Africans were emancipated or liberated from external political control and began to govern themselves. Therefore, in one sense decolonisation was a political process that ended at the time when Africans gained political independence. In another sense, decolonisation was a process by which Africans eliminated all elements of colonial control at the economic, political, and social, as well as psychological levels. In this sense, decolonisation was an ongoing process that did not end with the coming of political independence.

Historians have differed in their interpretations of the process of decolonisation in Africa. A central point of contention remains the degree to which decolonisation facilitated a substantive departure from the colonial past, or whether it merely restructured existing hierarchies. Historians such as Leys (1975) have argued that decolonisation could not have produced a radical change in Africa because it was narrowly interpreted as a political process. Fanon (1963) and Rodney (1972) argued that decolonisation did not mark a departure from the past. They maintained that many colonial political, economic, and social structures remained intact after independence. According to this view, the newly independent African states continued to depend on former colonial powers.

The current conditions in Africa are complex and disheartening. Despite the adoption of democracy, many African states continue to find themselves in deep economic crises, political instability, and growing inequalities. This underscores the fact that the anticipation that Western liberal democracy would automatically yield economic development and substantive social transformation has largely remained unfulfilled. Instead, the imposed Western democracy has failed to take into account Africa's unique historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts.

The continent's development path is further complicated by global economic structures that perpetuate dependency and underdevelopment. This is because the economic interests of former colonial powers in Africa were not eliminated by political independence. While new African states inherited dependent economies, such a structure was not changed after independence. For instance, capital investment, which was meant to develop African economies, was still dominated by former colonial

powers. It soon became clear that the political independence that Africa received gave way to economic stagnation and poverty.

Ultimately, political independence was not going to be a panacea for economic development. This made some commentators point out that Africa only received flag independence without economic independence. This is because institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (WB) became a defining feature of African economic policy. While these financial institutions were promoted as necessary for fiscal responsibility and democratic governance in Africa, it appears that they contributed to and continue to marginalise African states in the global economy. This is supported by the fact that these institutions impose austerity policies, undermining health, education, and wider development across the continent. The evident failure of externally imposed democratic models has catalysed critical scholarly debates aimed at fundamentally rethinking the paradigms of development and governance in Africa. For instance, Ake (1996) argued that democracy in Africa cannot be transplanted from Western models. He further argued that it must evolve from indigenous social structure and needs. Similarly, Mamdani (2018) contended that colonial legacies have produced bifurcated states that undermine democratic consolidation. In contrast, Diamond (2024) maintained that external support can foster democracy but only when coupled with local ownership and institutional reforms. However, scholars such as Táíwò (2022) have challenged the simplistic rejection of democracy as foreign and argued that democracy's failures in Africa originate not from its Western origins but from flawed implementation and elite capture.

The motivation came from Captain Ibrahim Traore's (military leader of Burkina Faso) comment about democracy and development in Africa. In his comment, Traore asserted that "it is impossible to name a country that has developed in democracy. Democracy is only the result" (Wahab, 2025). Captain Traore's assertion is supported by historical evidence. For instance, South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore experienced decades of authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governance before transitioning to more democratic systems, during which they achieved rapid industrialisation and economic growth. These cases suggest that economic and infrastructural development often lay the groundwork for sustainable democracy, rather than the reverse.

Ake (1991) warned that Western democracy in Africa has always served to legitimise systems of control and dependency rather than enabling genuine economic development. He emphasised the

connection between democracy and economic transformation. He further argued that democracy is not just about elections but should be about empowering economically, socially and politically. When these models failed to deliver on their promises, they risked legitimising a state of structural dependency, reinforcing the very neocolonial ties they were intended to transcend. This paper discussed the grand description of Western democracy as a path to development in Africa. Using historical analysis, discourse analysis, and post-colonial theory, it examines the roots of Africa's post-independence development challenges and the extent to which democratic ideals have hindered the continent's pursuit of development. The paper concludes by arguing for a democratic ideal that is specific and historically grounded in African values, priorities, and aspirations.

1.2. Conceptual analysis

The paper discusses the grand deception that Western liberal democracy said it leads to development outcomes.[1] It challenges the dominant narratives that conflate democratic governance with economic and social progress. This study originates from a post-colonial perspective that problematises the global imposition of Western democratic standards, questioning the presumption that these models are universally applicable or inherently developmental. It questions the proposition that Western democracy functions as a vehicle for genuine development. It conceptualises democracy not as a system that is described by free elections, human rights, and multiple political parties. It views democracy as an idea that is shaped by liberal beliefs that make societies naturally move from one person to liberal capitalism.

The process of promoting democracy than anything else, has hidden unfair power dynamics, pressure from international financial institutions and the influence of leaders from African states who personally benefit from this. This can hurt democracy and hinder any country from developing independently. Democracy was conceptualised primarily as a system defined by the equitable distribution of wealth, the fundamental trustworthiness of institutions, and the substantive exercise of power by

[1] The phrase "grand deception" does not refer to a secret plot. Instead, it refers to a big gap between what this democracy has promised (progress and development) and what happens in many African states. This is because Western countries have often promoted democracy as part of modernisation.

the citizenry. While democracy may appear to represent advancement, it often serves merely as a facade that enhances the image of governments, even when they lack true democratic principles or independence. In recent scholarship, Adesina (2012) and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019) argued that democracy in Africa has been reduced to electoral rituals without economic sovereignty. With this, they argued that democracy has become a mechanism of control rather than empowerment.

Western liberal democracy refers specifically to liberal democratic systems that are characterised by multi-party elections, individual civil liberties, separation of powers, and market-oriented economic policies. It includes the ideological assumption that democracy is universally applicable and desirable (Huntington, 1991). Development is operationalised as multidimensional, including economic growth, social equity, institutional capacity, and sustainable livelihoods (Sen, 1999). The narrowly Western view of development, which defines it in terms of GDP growth and market reforms, is limited; development should instead encompass improving people's lives.

Democracy is positioned not only as a fixed formula to be exported but also as an evolving practice whose legitimacy must derive from its ability to respond to the needs, values, and histories of African peoples. In this way, one can better assess whether Western democracy in Africa represents a genuine path to development or a grand deception sustained by hope, habit, and hegemony.

1.3. Issue on African Development

African economies after independence had a very active extractive sector but an almost non-existent manufacturing sector. The existence of such a situation was not good for the process of economic development. The lack of complementarity between these two sectors meant that African economies could not develop forward and backward linkages for the purposes of economic development. Another problem that made the economic development of Africa difficult after independence was that the pattern of economic activity that existed under colonialism was not changed. It continued to be a pattern whereby the underdevelopment of African economies continued. The structure was such that Africa exported commodities to Europe and imported manufactured goods from Europe.

Even after the attainment of independence, Africa continued to be an exporter of raw materials to Europe. This pattern of economic

activity was not beneficial to African countries. This pattern was sustained by neoliberal economists who persuaded African nations that prioritising the export of raw materials to European markets would secure the economic development they sought. The problem with this pattern of activity is that it increased the economic dependency of African economies on those of Europe. At the same time, it failed to bring about the economic development of African countries.

The failure of Africa to achieve economic development has led some scholars, such as Ezeonwuka (2023), to argue that the promise of democracy and development, as championed by Western powers, was a grand deception. The anticipation that democracy would usher African states into economic development initially has, in many cases, been replaced by disappointment and unmet expectations. Adedeji (1999) and Mkandawire (2001) stressed the necessity of state-led developmentalism to counter neoliberal orthodoxy. Amin (2014) argued that Africa's development requires delinking from global capitalist hierarchies. These external economic constraints are further compounded by internal governance weaknesses, where corruption, weak institutions, and elite capture limit the capacity of states to pursue autonomous development agendas.

The main duty of African leaders, therefore, was to lead their states to a smooth political transition and the consolidation of their democracies. There was hope that Africa would achieve this because the struggle for democracy was, in most instances, very democratic. However, evidence indicates that immediately after independence, the process of democratic transition proved to be very difficult. For instance, Young (2004) and Mkandawire (2010) argued that many newly independent African states quickly descended into authoritarian rule or single-party state systems. Hyden (2009) contends that these systemic developments eroded the foundations of sustainable democracy, as they fostered informal networks that bypassed formal constitutional checks and balances. African leaders who assumed the throne during the transition were moving to a process of destroying the democracy that had been developed in a struggle for independence. According to Nkrumah (1965) and Fanon (1963), the democratic transition proved to be difficult for many African leaders because the political freedom that Africa received consisted of deeper economic dependency on the former colonial powers. Nkrumah (1965) further discussed this in his neocolonialism theory. In this theory, he discussed how, despite political independence, African states have remained under the economic and

political influence of Western powers through trade relations, foreign aid, and multinational corporations. On the other hand, Fanon (1963) argued that when African leaders received political independence, instead of fighting against the unfair systems that were put in place by colonial rule, they embraced the system and accepted ideas from former colonisers. He further argued that the existence of this dynamic ensured that the promise of independence was never fully realised in Africa.

African scholars such as Forjwuor (2023) have criticised the idea that a Western type of democracy was a panacea for Africa's development challenges. These scholars contend that upon attaining political independence, many African leaders proceeded to construct their states based on Western democratic constitutional models, largely disregarding indigenous African realities. They point to these political systems that were imposed in Africa as one of the barriers that have failed to align with the historical realities of Africa. For instance, Chabal and Daloz (1999) pointed out the signs of contradiction between the Western democratic system and traditional institutions that Africans were familiar with. They indicated that this contradiction between imported democracy and traditional institutional structures led to the rise of corruption, political instability, and ineffective state institutions. This situation was exacerbated by the fact that exponents of the idea of "democracy" as a vehicle of development, such as Sen (1999) and Huntington (1991), did not adequately demonstrate how democracy translates into socio-economic development.

Rodney (1972) argued that Western powers are responsible for Africa's underdevelopment. He continued to argue that colonialism created a structure that European nations used to exploit African economies. He further argued that when African countries received political independence, these structures were not changed; they continued to shape African economies even after independence. This analysis indicated that Africa was not only politically colonised but was also economically subordinated to the world capitalist system. The conclusion that can be drawn from this analysis is that Western powers not only influenced Africa economically but also exerted their influence on the development of Africa.

This process of European influence has been referred to by Nkrumah (1965) as neocolonialism. He defined this as a mechanism through which Western powers sustain their dominance over African states, employing strategies such as economic coercion and military interference. The political structures that Africa inherited from

colonialism were disposed to manipulation by external actors. After independence, many African leaders, instead of attempting to develop their states, heavily relied upon foreign aid for development in their countries. This aid came with a lot of burden for African states, as they were forced to follow European ideas about how to run their economies through the conditionalities of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which promoted neoliberal market reforms and limited state intervention (Stiglitz, 2002).

Scholars such as Ake (1996) and Yacouba & Emmanuel (2017) have argued that the failure of Western democracy in Africa should also consider internal factors. They have pointed out a role played by African leaders who assumed the throne after independence and perpetuated the conditions of underdevelopment. For instance, Mobutu Sese Seko's regime in Zaire exemplified how post-independence leaders perpetuated underdevelopment. Mobutu diverted state resources to his own enrichment while eroding public institutions. Many African leaders perceived political office as a commercial enterprise, one that was expected to yield personal dividends rather than serve the public interest (Bayart, 2009). Another example is that of Robert Mugabe's authoritarian nationalism in Zimbabwe, which illustrated how political office became a vehicle for personal enrichment rather than public service (Raftopoulos 2013). The recent analyses continue this line of critique by noting contemporary figures such as Paul Biya, who sustains neopatrimonial systems that obstruct democratic consolidation and development (Munyai & Ashukem, 2023). Mamdani (2018) argued that the structure that Africans inherited perpetuated a system of governance that was more concerned with maintaining political power than addressing the needs of the society at large.

The SAPs that European powers introduced to African states have further hindered development. The programmes are always viewed as necessary steps for development and economic modernisation. However, it has produced severe austerity measures, cut social services, and reduced public sector employment. Ferguson (2006) argued that the introduction of these SAPs in Africa did not address the structural causes of underdevelopment; instead, they have exacerbated inequalities within African societies. His work on the politics of development in Africa is not kind to the Western development model. His main critique of the Western model is that it ignores the historical and social contexts of African states.

Some scholars have called for a rethinking of Western democracy in Africa. For instance, Ochonu (2025) argued that in Western discourse, the universalisation of liberal democracy and the denigration of alternative political forms in the non-Western world reflect a Eurocentric binary that must be challenged and rejected. He further argued that there are different kinds of democracy and different ways of being democratic, and Africa had several kinds of democracy before colonisation and before colonial contact. So did Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Aligning with this perspective, Sen (1999) contended that development should be viewed as the expansion of human freedoms; this necessitates a democracy that addresses systemic justice and the empowerment of people's skills rather than focusing solely on economic metrics. These scholars challenge Western models in political and development discourse. They are in favour of an approach that recognises cultural and historical experiences. Mazrui (2004) and Olaniyan (2008) are among African scholars who have called for and proposed an Afrocentric type of democracy that is centred on traditions, values, and historical African experiences.

Similarly, Thiong'o (1986) focused on the importance of cultural decolonisation in Africa, which the Western type of democracy has failed to restore in Africa. According to him, it is this decolonisation that Africa needs to foster meaningful development. The view was that African states needed to reclaim their cultural identity and challenge the colonial legacies entrenched in the educational and political systems. He viewed cultural reawakening as a significant step in creating a sense of unity and purpose among African states. A conclusion that is highlighted by his work is that there is a need for Africa to develop its own type of governance and development, rather than copying Western democratic models that have proved to fail to address Africa's unique circumstances.

The reviewed literature on Western democracy and development highlights that Africa is caught between the promise of independence and the continuing underdevelopment on the continent. While some attribute Africa's developmental struggles to the failures of domestic governance, the prevailing view suggests that the enduring legacy of colonialism and the rigid imposition of Western-style democracy have proven inadequate for addressing uniquely African challenges. This is the reason many African scholars have called for the type of democracy that is African. The mention of "grand" is because of the failure of Western democracy and development to deliver on promises.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded in neocolonialism theory to address the topic of Western Democracy and the Promise of Development in Africa. The term "neocolonialism" was popularised by Nkrumah (1965), and it refers to the continued dominance of European powers over Africa after the end of formal colonial rule. Neocolonialism means the mechanism of control over politics and the economy from outside. It serves as the primary conduit through which European powers continue to exert authority over African governance and fiscal policy, reinforcing the neocolonial dynamics that hinder true autonomy. This has appeared in the form of foreign economic policies, control of African resources by multinational corporations, and the continued influence of Western powers in shaping African governance models.

Rodney (1972) argued that global financial institutions are the main examples of neocolonial economic strategies that have been used by Western countries to exacerbate underdevelopment in Africa. According to Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2019), Africa has continued to experience many colonial structures even after the dismantlement of direct colonial administration. He further argued that colonialism is not over but all over—it pretended to have died but instead mutated into an invisible system that hides within global structures.

The introduction of Western democracy in Africa was viewed as a prescription that would cure problems of African underdevelopment and set the continent on a developmental path. Democracy was promoted across Africa under the premise that it held the requisite authority to foster peace and political stability, thereby curbing the intra-African conflicts that were often characterised as endemic to the continent. For instance, Lynch, Cheeseman, and Willis (2019) have argued that Euro-American nations promote peace narratives around elections in Africa, linking these narratives to promoting democracy or order. However, despite these external efforts, democracy has failed to lead Africa to development. The introduction of multi-party systems has often led to political instability and authoritarianism (Mkandawire, 2001). This occurred because the majority of Africans, after independence, had not experienced the functioning of multi-party democracy, as colonialism did not allow Africans to participate in parliamentary governance. The results have been the entrenchment of elite power and the exacerbation of socio-economic inequalities—leading outcomes of the so-called democratic project.

To understand the performance of democracy in Africa, it is important to study the intervention and financial assistance that European countries have offered in the name of promoting democracy and development. The persistent failure to achieve substantive development, despite decades of political independence, suggests that Africa has yet to dismantle the legacy of colonial domination, which continues to function through contemporary neocolonial structures. Western democracy and development in Africa have been used as a grand deception. Neocolonialism theory helps challenge hegemonic accounts of Africa's development and advocates governance models that reflect the aspirations of African societies. The critique does not reject democracy but calls for an inclusive approach to governance that is grounded in African contexts and realities.

1.5. Research Methodology

1.5.1 Method

The paper relied on a qualitative approach to conduct a systematic literature review of Western democracy and development in Africa. It primarily used secondary data. The review covered historical and contemporary perspectives on Western democracy in Africa. The World Bank's 1989 report was analysed to scrutinise how it positioned Western liberal democracy as a panacea for governance failures, while conspicuously overlooking the structural legacy of colonialism and persistent socio-economic inequalities. Burkina Faso President Ibrahim Traoré's speech (Wahab, 2025) was examined as a pushback that challenges the idea that democracy and development always go together. Ghana's adoption of SAPs under IMF guidance in the 1980s was examined as a case where democratic reforms coexisted with economic policies that deepened inequalities (Mkandawire, 2001).

Preference was given to works that directly address Western democracy and development in Africa. The interest was on sources that engage with the consequences of these models. The review focused on sources from the time when African countries received their political independence. This was adopted to encompass both historical and contemporary debates concerning governance, development, and post-colonial dynamics within the African context. In addition, the authority of sources was crucial in the selection process, as more emphasis was

placed on works by leading scholars in fields such as political science, history, African studies, international relations, and development studies.

The use of secondary data sources, according to Largan and Morris (2019), helps to collect information from papers published in peer-reviewed journals, technical reports, and government reports. Data was sourced from different databases, including Scopus, Google Scholar, and Sabinet African Journals reports. To consult the data related to the literature, the researcher used the words "Western democracy" and "Development in Africa" and "democracy in Africa". A total of 100 articles, books, and dissertations were selected purposively for this study. After various stages of screening, a total of forty-six (46) sources were purposefully selected. These sources were enough to address the questions and aim of this study.

The collected qualitative data were analysed thematically. Thematic analysis enabled the researcher to identify, understand, and interpret recurring themes that emerged from the critical literature review. This approach was complemented by textual analysis, which helped to identify intersecting, convergent, and divergent findings and conclusions across different studies on Western democracy and the promise of development in Africa (see, for example, Braun & Clarke, 2006; Squires, 2023). By employing these analytical methods, the study provides a more nuanced exploration of the scholarly debates and critiques surrounding the relationship between Western-style democracy and African developmental trajectories.

1.6 Findings and Discussion

1.6.1 Contextualisation of Western Democracy and Development in Post-Colonial Africa

The operation of Western democracy in Africa has been a promise and a paradox. Many African leaders who ruled after independence adopted political systems and ideas from colonial powers. These democratic ideals were adopted across Africa primarily because they were framed as the essential pathway to political stability, economic prosperity, and the protection of human rights (Mkandawire, 2015). However, the promise of a political and economic system has failed to address Africa's challenges (Thelma et al., 2024; Nkrumah, 1965). This has created a divide between Western assumptions and African realities (Park, 2019).

African states were expected to develop like Western countries if they adopted democracy. Despite the adoption of Western democracy, the situation has proved that the political, economic, and social conditions in Africa have completely failed to improve (Koelble & Lipuma, 2008; Bayart, 2009). The democratic ideals that were viewed as a prerequisite for development have not worked in Africa, as the continent continues to be dominated by Western countries (Bardhan, 2000; Morris, 2022). However, the outcomes of these efforts reveal a deepening crisis rather than the anticipated flourishing of democratic governance and economic development (Mkandawire, 2015). While the promise of Western democracy seemed to offer hope, the African reality is far more complex, and the actual benefits are less pronounced.

Historically, the discourse on development has been inextricably linked to the global proliferation of Western democratic ideals. As African nations gained independence, they were told that embracing democracy would not only free them from the shackles of colonialism but also usher in an era of economic prosperity (Sikuka, 2017; Ayittey, 1992). Development was framed as the inevitable result of democratic governance, but African countries have found themselves caught between the rhetoric of democracy and the harsh practicalities of their own socio-economic and political conditions (Chigudu, 2022; Zunes, 1994). In this context, development became a goal that was defined by Western standards, with African nations encouraged to adopt policies that mirrored those of the industrialised world. Unfortunately, these strategies have failed to account for the continent's unique challenges. Instead, they have led to increased dependency on foreign aid and external expertise.

Africa's engagement with Western-style democracy has been profoundly shaped by the post-World War II international order, an era defined by the magnified influence of Western powers in global geopolitics (Edor, 2024). International institutions such as the United Nations, the WB, and the IMF play a key role in promoting democratic reforms as part of their broader economic agendas (Grosfoguel, 2013). These institutions have operated on the assumption that development always follows Western liberal democratic ideals.

Kenya and Nigeria are African countries that provide instances where democratic institutions exist with entrenched patronage systems and ethnic polarisation. In Kenya, the 2007 post-election violence exposed how democratic elections could be manipulated to ignite ethnic conflict (Lynch, Cheeseman, and Willis, 2019). In Nigeria, elections are

frequently marred by vote-buying and elite capture (Adesina, 2012). These examples undermine the legitimacy of democracy.

The argument that Western liberal democracy brings development is historically and empirically contestable. Rwanda, under President Paul Kagame, has achieved impressive development indicators through centralised governance even though this has happened at the expense of political multiplicity (Straus, 2019). Rather than evaluating African political systems through a binary lens of autocracy or democracy, these examples highlight the importance of developing contextually relevant governance models that address specific socio-economic needs. Sustainable development in Africa requires institutions rooted in communal values, historical experiences, and socio-economic realities. A key insight from Ochonu's argument (2025) is that many Western nations industrialised under non-democratic systems; however, once development occurred, democracy evolved to consolidate those gains. Thus, democracy has not caused development but can protect it once achieved. The relationship between democracy and development is dialectical rather than oppositional. This means that development may precede democracy, but both can mutually reinforce each other once in place.

1.6.2 The Promise of Western Democracy

The end of World War II produced democracies around the world. After this war, the world was divided into two blocs, East and West, and each had its own democratic description. In the West, liberal democracy emphasised individual rights, multi-party elections, separation of powers, and a capitalist economy. In contrast, the Eastern or socialist democracy promoted collective welfare, state-guided participation, and equality within a centrally planned system. These divergent interpretations of democracy reflected the broader ideological contest between capitalism and socialism that defined the Cold War era. However, it was after the fall of communism that the world experienced a dramatic increase in the number of democracies. As former colonies gained independence, Western powers used international organisations to strongly advocate for the adoption of Western democratic systems in Africa. For instance, the General Assembly of the United Nations passed Resolution 1514, which was generally referred to as the Colonialism Declaration. This declaration stipulated that the continued subjection of peoples to foreign rule and exploitation constituted a denial of their fundamental human

rights. The concept of Western democracy was viewed as the only appropriate form of governance for newly independent states (Ayittey, 1992). The United States was an influential promoter of Western democracy (Zunes, 1994). Democracy was presented as a universal solution to political instability, economic underdevelopment, and human rights abuses (Fanon, 1963). For many African states, this created an impression that adopting Western democratic ideals would make African nations flourish.

Leaders like Nkrumah of Ghana advocated for democratic participation and economic modernisation as part of the broader Pan-African vision (Nkrumah, 1965). Similarly, in other African nations, the idea that democracy would lead to development became pronounced as an integral part of national discourse. Citizens were encouraged to engage with the democratic process, which was presented as the primary mechanism for securing political liberties and enhancing living standards (Ayittey, 1992). However, the realities of implementing democracy were far more challenging than initially anticipated, and many African nations soon faced obstacles that hindered the realisation of their democratic dreams (Mkandawire, 2015).

1.6.3. The Development Discourse

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, Western democracy emerged as the most popularly accepted form of government around the world. The idea that democracy would bring development was a central tenet of Western advocacy for democratic systems in post-colonial Africa (Ayittey, 1992). But Ochonu (2025) argued that the case of the development in Western countries is a lie. He argues that the US became a developed country when it was at best a severely restrictive democracy and at worst an authoritarian imperial plutocracy. The so-called Gilded Age of America, when the country became an industrialised "developed" economy and military power (1865-1904), was a period in which the US could hardly be described as a liberal democracy. At the time Britain became a "developed" country and economy, it had not fully become a constitutional monarchy. Moreover, it practised slavery, authoritarian colonial rule, and many other undemocratic systems of rule and administration in its vast global empire. Ochonu concludes by arguing that several European nations, including the Scandinavian countries, achieved their developed status under absolute monarchies rather than through democratic governance.

It appears that the development discourse surrounding Western democracy often ignores the complexities of the African experience. The assumption that market reforms and liberal democracy would automatically lead to prosperity was overly simplistic (Fanon, 1963). Many African nations continue to grapple with structural challenges—such as deficient infrastructure, limited educational access, and entrenched inequalities—that defy purely political solutions. The connection between democracy and development left little room for alternative models of governance or development that suit African contexts (Zunes, 1994). This narrow understanding of development fails to acknowledge the importance of historical, cultural, and social factors in shaping Africa's path toward prosperity.

1.6.5 Challenges in the Implementation of Western Liberal Democracy in Africa

The implementation of Western-style democracy in Africa has faced several hurdles rooted in cultural, historical, and institutional differences. One significant challenge was the imposition of Western democratic norms and institutions that did not always align with the socio-political realities of African societies. For example, the principles of individualism, secularism, and political pluralism, which form the basis of Western democracy, conflict with African communal values, which emphasise collective decision-making, spirituality, and the centrality of kinship ties in governance (Mamdani, 2018). Following independence, many African nations shared governance commonalities rooted in consensus-based decision-making, the moral authority of elders, and a deep-seated respect for traditional leadership. These structures were completely sidelined under colonial rule. These conditions in Africa did not change with the coming of independence. Joseph (1997) argued that

> democratisation was not supposed to happen in Africa. It had too little of what seemed necessary for constitutional democratic politics. African countries were too poor, too culturally fragmented, and insufficiently capitalist; they lacked the requisite civic culture. The middle classes were usually weak and more bureaucratic than entrepreneurial, and they were often co-opted into authoritarian political structures. African countries have not enjoyed the promises of democracy because the continent still has political and economic cultures that are underdeveloped and unstable.

What is also visible in most African states is the lack of necessary conditions for instituting liberal democracy, such as a strong and independent middle class, a competitive party system, constitutionalism and rule of law, a neutral bureaucracy, and strong market economies. Joseph (1997) further argued that in this setting, it is difficult to build a liberal democracy. Furthermore, the legacy of colonialism has made it difficult for new governments to build the capacity that is necessary to implement democratic reforms. African political systems have often grappled with instability and graft; these challenges are exacerbated by opaque governance structures that hinder both economic development and social trust (Hyden, 1999). This has led to democratic ideals being subordinated to the need for national stability. The threats to democracy in West Africa have been affected by the rising coup d'états that have occurred. In West Africa since 2020, four (4) coup d'états have been successful (Ajala, 2023). Africa has experienced nine (9) coups since 2020 (Vines, 2024). The main cause of these coups is that many African leaders have held on to power for decades through manipulated constitutional amendment processes, electoral fraud, and suppression of the opposition (Akinola & Makombe, 2024).

1.6.7 Case Studies in Africa

Ghana was the first African country to gain independence in 1957. It provides a typical example of the difficulties of adapting democracy to African realities. Ghana, under the leadership of Nkrumah, attempted to build a democratic system that was grounded in the principles of Pan-Africanism, which emphasised the unity, solidarity, and self-determination of African peoples, and socialist ideals that promoted state-led economic planning, social equality, and the collective ownership of resources to achieve national development and reduce dependence on former colonial powers. However, the implementation of Nkrumah's principles was hindered by internal political divisions, severe economic challenges, and significant external political pressures. After a military coup in 1966, Ghana's democratic path failed, and the country went through several cycles of military and civilian governments. This experience highlights the difficulty of establishing stable democratic governance in a context marked by economic dependency, external influence, and a lack of political culture grounded in democratic practices (Poe, 2023). In recent years, Ghana's democratic progress seems to have reached a stagnated state. This sentiment is

supported by the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem, 2024) project, which argues that Ghana is one of the countries that has lost the status of liberal democracy. Although the country still has an electoral democracy, V-Dem (2024) data suggest that the country is on the path of democratic erosion because the election management body, in particular, has declined.

The promise of democracy in Kenya has also faced significant challenges. Despite achieving independence in 1963, Kenya's transition to a democratic order was stifled by pervasive political patronage, ethnic favouritism, and unresolved land disputes. The rule of Jomo Kenyatta, and later Daniel Arap Moi, centralised power and undermined democratic accountability as opposition movements were suppressed through political manipulation, corruption, and state repression. These issues were exacerbated by the heavy influence of foreign aid that came with strings attached (Leys, 1975). South Africa's transition to democracy in the 1990s was similarly fraught with challenges, as the African National Congress's struggle for liberation was complicated by post-apartheid socio-economic inequalities that continued to marginalise the majority population.

In Rwanda, the development trajectory has been marked by the strong, centralised control of the government under Paul Kagame since the 1994 genocide. Under Kagame's leadership, Rwanda has seen significant economic progress alongside authoritarian governance that curtails opposition. The government's focus remains on infrastructure, social welfare, and national cohesion. However, critics such as Human Rights Watch (2023) and Reyntjens (2018) argued that this development comes at the expense of political rights, freedom of speech, and political pluralism. The government's strict control over political discourse and its crackdown on dissent raise questions about the sustainability of Rwanda's developmental model. Rwanda's experience highlights the tension between economic growth and democratic freedoms, illustrating that development, under authoritarian leadership, may come with significant sacrifices in terms of political liberties (Straus, 2019).

Burkina Faso has seen fluctuating political and military leadership driven by popular support for military rulers. Since the 1980s, the country has witnessed several coups, with military leaders like Thomas Sankara (1983–1987) earning popular support through radical reforms aimed at reducing poverty, improving education, and promoting Pan-Africanism. Sankara's government initially prioritised development through an anti-imperialist, socialist agenda. However, his assassination

in 1987 led to the return of more traditional military leadership under Blaise Compaoré, whose tenure was marked by a mixture of economic development and authoritarian rule. The 2014 uprisings that ousted Compaoré demonstrated the persistent demand for genuine democratic reforms and better governance. Burkina Faso's experience highlights the complexity of military leadership and a lack of political freedoms (Sawo, 2017).

1.6.8 Impact on Development

The promises of development tied to Western democracy in Africa exacerbated rather than alleviated existing challenges. Western democratic frameworks are frequently imposed in ways that overlook the unique cultural, social, and historical contexts of African nations. While these frameworks promise economic growth, political stability, and social welfare, the reality has been markedly different. The imposition of Western-backed democracy has, in many instances, failed to deliver results, leading instead to systemic corruption, governance failures, and persistent economic decline (Mkandawire, 2001). For example, post-independence African nations find themselves struggling with underdeveloped infrastructure, failing health systems, and entrenched inequalities. These failures have sparked widespread disillusionment and led to social unrest as people continue to experience unmet developmental expectations (Sachs, 2005). As a result, Western democracies' inability to meet the promises of development in Africa has contributed to a cycle of underdevelopment that has eroded the credibility of democratic institutions.

1.7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper should not be conceived as rejecting democracy as a concept, but it challenges the uncritical adoption of Western liberal democracy as a developmental blueprint. It posits that there has never been one universal model of democracy. There are types of democracy that evolve in different countries according to those countries' histories, religious experiences, political experiences, economic structures, cultures, values, etc. It promotes an indigenous democratic framework which is rooted in history, socially inclusive, and culturally authentic. Africa needs a system of governance that reflects the continent's diversity, promotes local

agency, and resists external prescriptions that serve the interests of colonial powers more than local aspirations.

The idea that Western democracy would be able to solve African problems is a deeply deceptive narrative. From colonial times to the present, Western powers have advocated for democracy as the only political system that would fix African development problems. This system has not addressed the African problem; instead, it has made African states rely on foreign aid and investments. As a result, many African states have experienced a growing number of military takeovers because of political unrest, poverty and inequality. Moreover, the economic policies of the free market and privatisation associated with Western democracy have often proved counterproductive. Within Africa, the adoption of these policies has arguably benefited former colonial powers more than the African states themselves.

The paper contends that Africa is at a stage where it should rethink how democracy and development should work. The copying and pasting of the Western political systems have completely failed to address Africa's development problems. What is absent from this Western political framework is the acknowledgement of the control and domination to which African states have been subjected since gaining political independence. The type of political system that Africa must consider is one that incorporates indigenous traditions, local knowledge, and core community values.

Development in Africa has only been regarded as the development of the economy. Africa must adopt a governance system that prioritises both economic growth and the tangible improvement of human lives, ensuring that development is measured by social well-being as much as by fiscal metrics.

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