



# Democracy in Africa Is in Decline, Mo Ibrahim Prize Is Not the Solution

By Abdullahi Boru Halakhe



Few have done more to entrench democracy in Africa than Mohamed Ibrahim through his Mo Ibrahim Foundation established in 2006. The foundation's signature effort is the Ibrahim Prize. Three years after leaving office, an "exceptional role model" former head of state or government is awarded US\$5million over a period of ten years, and an additional US\$200,000 every year for life. Despite such a generous offer—over three times the Nobel Peace Prize—the Mo Ibrahim Prize has been awarded in only seven of the 15 years of its existence. The late Nelson Mandela was an honorary laureate in 2007. No worthy candidate has been found in the years since.

Design flaws and the changing global dynamics doomed the Ibrahim Prize. While the prize is the most generous of any awards out there in monetary terms, it was never close to what African leaders can "make" while in power. The presidency offers more than just direct financial rewards; there are indirect gains too that cannot be satisfied by monetary compensation. "Bribing" African leaders to be models of good governance misses the point that there is no ceiling for greed, and greed is insatiable.

One year after the Mo Ibrahim Foundation award was launched, the United States launched AFRICOM (United States Africa Command), and a year later, the global financial crisis hit. Combined, these factors stymied democratization in Africa.

While, of course, Africa's democracy cannot be predicated on a single prize, there has been no discernible improvement since the award was launched and it is fair to question whether the award is even necessary. For, despite the award, Africa's democracy has been in far worse shape since it was launched.

### **Democratic boom and slide**

The late 1980s and 1990s was a period of immense optimism across Africa. The Berlin Wall came down, the Cold War came to an end, and Nelson Mandela was released from prison, going on to lead South Africa into the first multi-racial election. These events collectively engendered a sense of buoyancy across Africa, and others started looking at Africa through rose-tinted glasses.

After a slow start, electoral democracy began taking root in Africa. According to Freedom House, during this buoyant period Africa went from having two-thirds of its countries classified as "Not Free", with only two countries — Botswana and Mauritius — classified as "Free" in 1989, to two-thirds of all African nations being classified as either "Free" or "Partly Free" by [2009](#).

Many civilian and military dictatorships were swept away, paving the way for the establishment of rule-of-law-based governance systems characterised by constitutionalism and constitutional government, including reforms such as the imposition of term limits.

That decade also saw the coming into power of former rebel leaders in Uganda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea — Yoweri Museveni, Meles Zenawi and Isaias Afwerki. This cohort was uncritically embraced and christened the "new breed" of African leaders. Decades later, with the exception of Meles who has died, the rest have their countries in a firm grip.

In 2021, Freedom House rated only eight countries in sub-Saharan Africa as free. Half of these are small island states — Cape Verde, Mauritius, Sao Tome and Principe, and Seychelles. The number of African countries that Freedom House rated "Not Free" has grown from a low of 14 in 2006 to 20 in 2021.

### **Presidential term limit**

Because of Africa's post-independence history, most constitutions included a presidential term limit to safeguard against presidential overreach in the absence of a strong legislature, judiciary, and civil service. Of almost 50 constitutions passed during Africa's wave of democratisation, more than 30 had a presidential [term limit](#). Some even included age limits beyond which a president cannot stand for election or serve.

But this attempt at full-proofing against presidential overreach has come under assault, with presidents attempting to extend their terms by fiddling with the constitution. Between April 2000 and July 2018, presidential term limits were changed 47 times in [28 countries](#), with at least six failed attempts to change the law: Frederick Chiluba of Zambia in 2001, Edgar Lungu of Zambia and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria in 2005, Mamadou Tandja of Niger in 2009-2010, and Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso in [2014](#). All [failed in their attempts](#).

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Leaders extend their terms using various means. Some increase their terms from five to seven years, as was the case in Guinea (2001), the Democratic Republic of Congo (2002), Rwanda (2003) and

Burundi (2018). In Chad (2018), the term was increased from five to six years while South Sudan (2015 and 2018) and [DRC](#) (2016) used the conflict in their countries to postpone elections thus prolonging their presidents' stay in power.

In the case of Zimbabwe (2013), the Democratic Republic of Congo (2015), and Rwanda (2015), terms of office were reset through constitutional amendments once the president reached the term limit.

In other countries, the incumbent removed the term limit altogether, as in the case of Guinea (2001), Togo (2002), Tunisia (2002), Gabon (2003), Chad (2005), Uganda (2005), Algeria (2008), [Cameroon](#) (2008), Niger (2009) and Djibouti (2010). The lack of effective term limits means that Africa has ten leaders who have ruled for over 20 years and two family dynasties that have been in power for more than [50 years](#).

The propensity of leaders to extend their terms is in complete dissonance with the disproportionate number of citizens opposed to it. According to a 2015 Afrobarometer survey, about 75 per cent of citizens in 34 African countries favour limiting presidential mandates to [two terms](#). Moreover, democracy is the preferred form of [governance](#) for 67 per cent of Africans.

Extending presidential term limits is associated with adverse social-economic outcomes. All eight African countries facing civil conflict (excluding insurgencies by militant Islamist groups) are without term limits. Of the 10 African countries that account for the largest number of Africa's 32 million refugees and internally displaced populations, seven countries do not have term [limits](#).

## **The War on Terror**

The 9/11 terror attacks and the 2008 financial crisis combined saw Western countries pivot away from promoting democracy in Africa.

The continent became the next frontier of the war on terrorism after Osama bin Laden was forced out of Saudi Arabia and settled in Sudan in the 1990s. This sufficiently alarmed the US, which then made security the dominant lens through it—and the rest of the West—viewed Africa and became the basis for policy formulation and engagement with the continent. Inevitably, the promotion of democracy was deprioritised with the attendant decline in spending and other resources.

In the same manner how Africa's former Big Men had positioned themselves as the vanguard against the spread of communism in Africa, a new crop of leaders instrumentalised the War on Terror and fashioned themselves as the last defence against terrorism. This opened the taps of Western largesse, training and political support and protected them from being held accountable. On the domestic front, these leaders passed some of the harshest anti-terror laws in line with President Bush's neat Manichean dichotomy—you are either with the terrorists or with us.

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The anti-terrorism laws became a blunt instrument with which to beat any organised opposition by reflexively declaring it terrorism, which inevitably meant using extra-legal means, including holding opponents in safe houses, and using torture, forceful disappearances and extrajudicial killings. All these eroded the burgeoning democracy.

The reflexive reaction to the events of 9/11 spawned an interlocking web of covert and overt military and non-military operations in Africa. Initially deemed necessary and temporary, these efforts have

since morphed into a self-sustaining system complete with agencies, institutions, and a specialised vocabulary that pervades every realm of America's engagement with Africa. AFRICOM has become the primary vehicle of America's engagement with the continent.

No president has exploited the War on Terror to their advantage more than the late Idris Déby of Chad and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda. Museveni used the War on Terror to turn Uganda into the [anchor](#) state in East Africa and the Great Lakes region, as he became repressive domestically. Debby made Chad the [gateway](#) to the Sahel region. In the political arena, Museveni pronounced [Kizza Besigye](#) and [Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu](#)—known by his stage name Bobi Wine—terrorists and visited terror upon them and their supporters.

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The Mo Ibrahim Foundation Award was first awarded in 2006; in 2007 AFRICOM was formed, in 2008, the global financial crisis hit. Privileging counterterrorism in engagement with Africa securitised everything, and the financial crisis limited the West's ability to continue funding democracy. In their place stepped African leaders who put themselves at the service of assuaging the West's security anxieties and thus severely damaged the nascent democracy. Unsurprisingly some of the Western-trained military leaders are now emboldened to overthrow elected leaders and replace them with military governments.

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