



False Freedom: The Hollow Pillars of Liberal Democracy

By Antoinette Kankindi



Premises

In a now commonly known assessment F. Fukuyama, after 1989 change in world systems, predicted the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government. It is the ideal system the African continent is not only looking up to, but also being either encouraged, or, in some instances forced to adopt. Saying liberal democracy, today, means a certain number of things that some people call features of liberal democracy, others call its values, others its characteristics, and so on. They include the rule of law; citizens' rule; majority rule, minorities' rights, individual rights; regular free and fair elections; democratic representation; freedom of speech, freedom of association and pressure groups; pluralism understood as distribution of power between competing groups, i.e. mainly political parties; freedom of religion; equality as equal opportunity to develop potential and equal say in government matters. This long list would be incomplete if it does not state that all this is ensured by constitutionalism understood as the system of checks and balances between State's arms of power drawing up the mechanism of cooperation and consultation between them on the one hand; and on the other between citizens and State institutions.

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the world, were demanding the system described above. Before them, those who have struggled to overcome the excesses of single party regimes, or even military regimes, sought to embrace liberal democracy.

The above shows how there can hardly be an exhaustive definition of liberal democracy. It is commonly accepted that it relies on classical liberalism which in turn, in simple terms, would mean an ideology concerned with man's freedom from any impositions. It is based upon the principles of liberty and equality. In addition, classical liberalism propounds a system as central to itself: private property, free market, unhampered by government rule; the rule of law; constitutional guarantee of freedom of the media and religious freedom, as well as peace achieved through trade, both domestically and internationally. If that is what is "liberal" in liberal democracy, what would be the "democracy" part in it? It would be the universal suffrage, a strong middle class, and an active civil society. Moreover, pluralism expressed through political parties is supposed to ensure that alternation in governing is possible since it is assumed that loyal opposition would give voters the chance to get out office individuals or a party that is not performing.

Those who have demanded periodically "democracy now", in Africa and in other parts of the world, were demanding the system described above. Before them, those who have struggled to overcome the excesses of single party regimes, or even military regimes, sought to embrace liberal democracy. Indeed it appears to create room for the sovereignty of the people to give itself a constitution; to accommodate the representation of large populations with the widest sociological diversity; to ensure the control of government is assured by the division of power with a direct control exercised by parliament, usually a bicameral one; and be open to citizens' participation as channels for people to organize themselves according to shared opinions and ideologies made possible by political parties. Has it worked? Some say in parts yes, and in parts it is a problem.

PROBLEM IN PRACTICAL TERMS

The problem, however, is that embracing liberal democracy on the African continent has yielded progress, yes but also has created new problems. It would be enough to look at the aftermath of the so-called "Arab Spring" in northern Africa. Moreover, the fact is and remains that the gains of multiparty politics as well as those of the recent revolutions in northern Africa in terms of achievements of social justice and peace are still questionable. Generally, in terms of what can be termed political common good understood as the different social conditions, material and non-material, that allow people as individuals and groups to develop their own potential and that of their community, small and large, liberal democracy hasn't done much. Instead, new forms of conflicts have sprung up. At times liberal democracy policies and practices have also created social paralysis. In this aspect, one can think of some unsuccessful coalition governments that created endless bickering rather than advance people's true development.

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The previous contribution to this publication alluded to the fact that liberal democracy conceptually promotes individualism which is in stark contrast with the basics of the African society based upon solidarity and hospitality. This is due to its major principles of absolute freedom and equality, which remain theoretical and impossible to translate into tangible response to people's needs. In a bid to

emulate developed societies' life style, or rather liberal democracies' life style for example, urban Africa is living some kind of a proxy life characterized by a growing individualism, with no other duties than seeking to maximize individual wellbeing through pronounced materialism, as well as a series of subjective rights. Why call it proxy life? On the one hand because so few have the means to actualize it. And on the other, because a much and far bigger number, on the continent, is still living very far below such standards, a fact that makes it impossible to unleash a critical mass of a middle class with decent income necessary for a stable democracy.

When it claims to be the rule of the majority, even in developed societies, including the United States of America, it often is the case that from the business world, to political institutions and municipalities, the will of the majority can find itself under a fierce control of just a few, normally a very restricted economic elite. In Western societies, the participation in political processes is similar to the law of the jungle: the survival of the fittest. The fittest here being the one with the money. Ordinary people do not see the difference their vote can make where financial power rules politics, which explains, in part, the declining number of those who actually vote. The case of recent general elections in France is an illustration of this. The same could be said of the shrinking power of organisations that used to represent ordinary people such as unions, which weakened the workers in the face of corporate power; a panorama suggesting that liberal democracy is a political system in which the free market rules. Consequently, at least in the west, the ordinary citizen looks like he is left aside. Such situation has forced even liberals like Mrs. Clinton to use, in her recent campaign, such concepts as inclusive capitalism instead; or the likes of Sen. Bernie Sanders to campaign against "Wall Street".

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The system is a problem if money controls politics, or if corporations control political agenda as well as the media. The resulting disenchantment is that elected political office holders do not represent the voters, they represent the interests of those who fund them. In Africa this is double jeopardy, as those who fund politicians could be, not just a small financial elite in any given country, but also foreign donors with special interests, far removed from the needs of the voters. The problem as it appears in practical terms demands that the tenets of liberal democracy be interrogated. Such an interrogation must first posit the problem in theoretical terms.

THE PROBLEM IN THEORETICAL TERMS

Asked recently about what has just started to go wrong in liberal democracies, Fukuyama said: "Well, there are several things. So one is just the fate of globalization, which actually worked very well in the aggregate. But it didn't benefit everybody equally. You know, we're now more than a generation away from the collapse of communism. And in a way, everybody now takes democracy for granted. And they're very unhappy with the way that their institutions are performing, I think, both in the United States and in Europe"[\[1\]](#). In the West, the reaction against globalization stems from the fact that huge swathe of the working population feels that the free market tied to the liberal democracy hasn't worked for them at all. It has increased the power of a small financial elite to decide the fate of a political system everyone else should put up with even if it is not working for them. That is what makes the illustrious Fukuyama say that people feel the pull of taking part in tribal societies instead.

Talking about tribal societies, in Africa, we never departed from our tribal societies. There is never a need to shun one's tribe as it does form part of one's identity. Trouble started when channeling

political pluralism in terms of political parties. In most African countries, multiparty politics drew up those political mechanisms of seizing and retaining power along tribal lines, perverting the tribe into tribalism. This permeated the only instance of political participation, i.e. elections, with the consequences known to all. The aggravating circumstance that goes with it is the sheer number of individuals that are far from being members of the so-called middle class. One could even say that what is called “middle class” in a number of African countries is the “indebted class” whose home is mortgaged, the car is on loan, school fees are on loan and, even sometimes, the furniture is on loan, etc...

However, it can't be said that what is wrong with liberal democracy should be reduced to the social ills of where it is to be implemented. This is because, liberal democracy is also flawed conceptually. Its flaws can be summarized in the following points, proving that its main pillars are rather hollow. Coming to terms with such a reality could push the debate to seek some corrective measures, in the African context, in some of our traditional understanding of the art of government as based upon wisdom. Which pillars appear to be hollow?

1. The principle of liberty and equality

When liberal democracy is touted as the most adequate system of government, it is assumed that it is because, through the distribution and control of power, it offers greater guarantee against arbitrariness and oppression. On such ground it defends its foundational principle of liberty and equality by presenting greater protection to individual liberty and respect for human rights, which are the expression of equality. In virtue of equality all can participate in democratic governance, because all are free and equal. However, political power cannot really be exercised by all. It is necessary to hand it to someone: that is what elections do. Hence the reason why for some, with elections the purpose of public governance is achieved. This means that the purpose of the political community is to give to the individual his rights and consequently the political community has no value in itself. It is an instrument for individual interest. Here is a major characteristic of the liberal tradition, in contrast with the republican tradition. The distinction between these two should be the object of a different issue.

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Considering the community as a mere instrument at the service of individual liberties, easily morphed into individual interests where free market reigns, is the surest way of emptying the concept of individual liberty of its content. This is because individual liberty exists within an order of liberties^[2]. Individual liberty cannot be absolute as liberal democracy has made it to be. It needs a measure, without which it can become a means of violence against other people's liberties. When individual liberty is absolute, it can easily create fertile ground for conflict of “us” against “them”, or, as it has been the case in totalitarian regimes, a case of conflict of all against all.

What is the right content of individual liberty then? It could have two meanings: fundamental human rights and prosperity for all as well as the good of each citizen. Such content refers directly to the common good, a concept that has not found room in liberal democracies, where it's all about interests. This demonstrates further why a true content for the idea of equality cannot be found either. Indeed human beings are different. We can't put the same value on the opinion of educated people and uneducated ones, wise elders and ignorant people, law abiding citizens and criminals, etc. More importantly those upon whom power is invested, in order to be free and equal, must

recognize their own good in the common good of the people they lead. This fact clashes, once again, against the wall of individual interests be they of the few or of corporations within a liberal democracy.

The discussion of what is lacking under the pillars of liberty and equality in liberal democracy indicates or gives rise to questioning its understanding of another of its seeming pillar: the idea of what is just.

2. The idea of what is just

In liberal democracy, there is a tension between the idea of freedom, as the form of democratic life, and the idea of what is just and what is right as its content^[3]. Observing today's trends, it can be easily seen that the emphasis is always on freedom, while what is just and good remain secondary matters and, in some instances, they appear in third, fourth or even fifth place in the debate, in the name of the fact that no one wants the State to shape their idea of what is just and/or good. This position is even pronounced when there is need to understand what is just in the light of the truth. The liberal tradition does not believe that truth, especially truth about what is good and just can be known at the level of the community or in the public sphere. Liberals firmly believe that truth belongs to the realm of the private sphere. Thinking about what is truly just and truly good for all is practically un-democratic. So the question is, what is then the foundation of liberal democracy's claim for social justice if there is no hint of a publicly, or commonly understood truth about what is just, not only for a ruling class but also for an ordinary citizen? Social justice appears then to be another hollow tenet of liberal democracy. The absence of a universal understanding of the truth not only about what is just but also about what is good, for the leader and the citizens, is one of the reasons why a number of thinkers are of the opinion that liberal democracy relies on relativism as another pillar for it as a system

3. The principle of relativism underlying the majority rule

The fact that liberal democracy relies on relativism is a contradiction in principles. This is because democracy is perceived to be the best guarantee of inviolable rights. Indeed, depriving others of their rights cannot be the content of justice and liberty. In fact it is core idea that points towards the ethical dimension that democracy can't really renounce. However, if democracy cannot accommodate a truly universal and unchangeable idea of freedom as limited by the order of freedoms -the idea of good as personal good and common good and the concept of the truth- it remains without any other reference for political decision except the principle of majority rule. In the political arena, relativism as a pillar of liberal democracy has substituted the truth by the majority rule. And justice is left to be determined by the law, meaning what the competent organs say, even if they could declare something wrong to be just. Here is why liberal democracy has come to be defined by the rules of the game which consists in forming majorities for the transmission and alternation of power. It is no longer about the common good of those who elect the leaders that count!

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The consequences of such relativism cover a wide range of facts such as populism that operates with opinion polls, when it is clear that popularity cannot be synonymous with right; partisan divides with consequent partisan legislation never meant to really achieve the common good but rather serve partisan interests; corruption in the form of clientelism where lobbies and corporations pay for

favours in the form of policies; entitlements; formal and informal complex systems of non-accountability etc.

Unmasking the hollow principles of liberal democracy is a duty, if a way to solve such problems is to be found. In summary, the quick diagnosis above shows that, only a return to the ethical dimension of democracy would pave the way to solutions. However, consideration on this needs a greater elaboration which must start from the truth about the nature of political society in order to restore the true meaning of freedom and equality. Such an elaboration would also need to include: a) a discussion on the true meaning and role of “civil society”; b) an analysis of the distinction between metaphysical liberalism and political liberalism, which would also indicate a mention of c) the distinction between the liberal democracy tradition and the republican tradition.

[1] <http://www.npr.org/2017/04/04/522554630/francis-fukuyama-on-why-liberal-democracy-is-in-trouble>

[2] Ratzinger, J. (2006), Truth, values and power, Rialp, 6th ed., Madrid, p. 82. (in Spanish)

[3] Ibidem, p.83.

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