

**NO CHOICE, BUT DEMOCRACY:
Prising the People out of Politics in Africa?**

Cyril I. Obi

Claude Ake Memorial Papers No. 2

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The Claude Ake Visiting Chair

A Claude Ake Visiting Chair was set up in 2003 at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research (DPCR), Uppsala University, in collaboration with the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI), also in Uppsala. Funding was provided from the Swedish Government, through the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The Chair was established to honour the memory of Professor Claude Ake, distinguished scholar, philosopher, teacher, activist and humanist, tragically killed in a plane crash near Lagos, Nigeria, in 1996.

The holders of the Claude Ake Visiting Chair give, at the end of their stay in Uppsala, a public lecture, entitled the 'Claude Ake Memorial Lecture.' While the title, thematic and content of the lecture is up to the holder, the assumption is that the topic of the lecture shall, in a general sense, relate the work of the holder to the work of Claude Ake, for example in terms of themes or issues covered, or in terms of theoretical or normative points of departure. The lecture is based on a paper prepared and made available to seminar participants and lecture audience in advance of the lecture.

In 2006 the DPCR and NAI decided to publish the papers that constitute the basis for the Memorial Lectures. An occasional paper series was created, entitled the Claude Ake Memorial Paper Series (CAMP). The papers are edited at the DPCR and published jointly by the DPCR and the NAI. In the future, the CAMP series may be opened up to contributions also from other scholars than the holders of the Visiting Chair.

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Uppsala
January 2008

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Editor's Foreword

This is the second issue of the CAMP series. It presents the text version of the 2004 Claude Ake Memorial Lecture, delivered by Dr. Cyril I. Obi, the second holder of the Claude Ake Visiting Chair at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University. On leave from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, Lagos, where he is an Associate Research Professor, Dr. Obi is currently leading the research programme on 'Post-Conflict Transition, the State and Civil Society in Africa' at the Nordic Africa Institute in Uppsala.

Noting that in Africa democracy is the only game in town, Obi raises herein pertinent questions about the nature of this democracy, its sustainability, popular appeal and legitimacy. With a point of departure in some central lines of thought in Claude Ake's work on democracy, such as Ake's discussion on liberal *vs* popular democracy and the 'potential' of democratisation and multiparty democracy to, under certain circumstances, function as a tool for disempowering the very people it is supposed to empower, Obi systematically scrutinizes African transitions to democracy in relation to factors such as economic reforms, donor pressures, lack of development, the limits of electoralism, patrimonialism and the nature of opposition politics.

The background is that, linked to the end of the Cold War, a wave of democratisation swept through Sub-Saharan Africa in the late 1980s/early 1990s. Outcomes varied from genuine transformations and relative success to halted transitions, backslides to authoritarianism and state failure, with the large majority of countries falling somewhere between these extremes. In some countries, escalating and repeated political violence and outbreaks of armed conflicts followed in the wake of initiated transition processes. Obi argues that ordinary Africans are increasingly becoming disenchanted with the new democracies, that do not deliver as they should. New questions for research have thus been raised, as the empirical experiences of democratisation in weak states in Africa and elsewhere seem to be at odds with some of the assumptions and predictions found in mainstream theoretical works on democratic transitions and democratisation. Democratisation and democracy simply does not seem to function 'as intended'. Why?

As a rule, the formal state apparatus has been weak in most African post-colonial states in terms of structure, resources and performance throughout the post-independence period. The legitimacy and authority of a leader has to a great extent been a function of the efficiency of the patrimonial network he/she controls. Thus, the distinction between objective, collective state interests, on the one hand, and the leader's/ regime's subjective, private inter-

ests, on the other, is blurred. Such states often show a hybrid political system in which the customs and patterns of patrimonialism prevail alongside with modern state features. The characteristic feature of neo-patrimonialism is thus the incorporation of a patrimonial logic into bureaucratic institutions. Adding democratisation—a transition to democracy—to this often generates a system with a democratic exterior, a façade, but with little genuine change taking place in its inner workings, that is, in terms of norms, values, power relations, the nature of interactions, etc. The ruler continues, by and large, to ensure the political stability of the regime and his/her personal political survival by selectively providing security and distributing rewards and services.

There are, in terms of notions of social justice and broadly legitimate systems of rule, three principal problems with these façade democracies, sometimes also called anocracies. First, they are exclusionary. Often lacking in both will and resources, leaders will not or cannot co-opt all segments of the population into the system, into a national social contract. This makes the system conflict prone and undemocratic. Second, they reward loyalty and obedience, rather than efficiency and creativity, not seldom leading to sacrifices in terms of productivity and resource growth. Third, and as a result of the two previous problems, neo-patrimonial systems are perceived by large parts of the population as corrupt and lacking in legitimacy. Obi points to the risk that the entrenchment of façade democracy, the premature closure of the democratisation process, as well as outright democratic regression, may in turn end up in chaos, militarism, and large-scale political violence.

The author points to the connection between multiparty democracy in Africa, disempowering people and favouring elites, and the pursuit by parts of the international community of a global hegemonic neo-liberal ideological project in Africa. Obi concludes that the challenge is about deepening democracy by returning power, ensuring social justice and a more equitable redistribution of resources to ordinary people through a transformatory process that empowers them to take control of the democratic project in the real sense of freely creating a government of the people, for the people, by the people. This process, he argues, is a political struggle to reduce the influence of those forces, on the continent and elsewhere, that underdevelop Africa.

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Thomas Ohlson
CAMP Series Editor

NO CHOICE, BUT DEMOCRACY: Prising the People out of Politics in Africa?

Cyril I. Obi

1. Introduction: Democracy, the Only Game in Town

Since the late 1980's most of Africa's countries have moved from one party or military dictatorships to multiparty democratic rule. This was the outcome of democratic pressures from within these countries, as well as a result of changes in the international system following the end of the Cold War. With a few exceptions, democracy has taken root and gained legitimacy in Africa as the most viable form of political organisation and governance underlined by rule of law as opposed to rule by brute force. Critical to this democratic opening is the widening of the political space to include new political actors, and the use of elections to choose rulers. In many cases, these elections were however far from being perfect, with the results being bitterly contested by those that lost. This was more so, when some governments used the power of incumbency and public resources to manipulate the electoral process in their own favour. By the late 1990's, in spite of the overwhelming presence of democratically elected regimes on the continent, it was possible to sense the beginning of popular disenchantment with the new democracies.

The high expectations of the people that democracy would reverse decades of poverty, corruption and underdevelopment have hardly been met by the new democrats. In some cases, such as in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo the collapse of the 'ancien regime' led to coup d'états, chaos, civil and regional wars, while in others, such as Togo, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia and Gabon, wily dictators legitimised their continued hold on power either by transforming from military strongmen to 'new democrats,' by repressing or dividing the opposition, or by allowing multi-partyism only to the extent that it was merely of symbolic value. But in a few significant cases, incumbents have been voted out of power after protracted struggles by the opposition—as in Senegal, Ghana and Kenya—while in Nigeria's case long years of military dictatorship and repression, and pressures from civil society led

to a military-authored transition programme that ushered a former military ruler back to power, this time through elections (Obi, 2000). In the rather ironic case of Cote d'Ivoire, once regarded as a haven of prosperity and peace—very much against the run of the democratic process on the continent—a military coup occurred in December 1999, followed by a descent into civil war a few years later, and the current uneasy peace. Even in South Africa, where democracy is being consolidated, and the ruling ANC has increased its electoral strength, it is clear that the maxim 'democracy answereth all prayers' is yet to be fulfilled in Africa.

Africa, in the spirit of the global moment has embraced democracy or, more precisely, liberal or multiparty democracy. This has found acceptance within Africa's political elite, and perhaps more significantly, within the donor community and Western democracies that seek to connect the process to market-based economic reforms and development on the continent. They also seek to globalise their own political culture and market ideology as part of the process of universal homogenisation.

Democracy in post-Cold War Africa has become the only game in town, with African countries and regional organisations investing a lot of resources and energy to enthrone and defend formal democracy. For example both Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU) and other regional organisations have institutionalised a policy of zero tolerance for military coups in Africa. In this regard, they have had cause to intervene in the political crises in Guinea Bissau, Sao Tomé and Príncipe, and Zimbabwe in the attempt to ensure that democracy is enthroned in these countries. However, the situation in Zimbabwe is a lot more complex and the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the AU, as well as the international community, have largely failed to arrest the steady slide of the country into crisis. There is no doubt that in African politics today, there is no choice, but democracy. Yet, beneath the progressive veneer of democratisation lies a lot of ambivalence and contradictions. It is therefore very important to examine whether what we have is true democracy, and how sustainable it is. Do we have real democracies or 'elected' dictatorships? Do the people have a real choice or are they confronted with more of the same, old wine in new bottles?

This is no attempt to reduce the significance of the post-Cold War political opening on the continent, or to downplay the importance of democracy for the freedom and development of Africa. Rather, it is to pose very critical questions about the nature and depth of the on-going democratic experience in Africa. The fundamental question being raised is: Whose democracy?

It is important to raise these questions for three related reasons. Firstly, this is not the first time that Africa is democratising. The democratic movement reached its highest point during the nationalist struggles that followed the end of the Second World War and ushered independence in most African States in the 1960's. This process continued in Lusophone Africa, whose countries gained independence in the 1970's following a prolonged armed liberation struggle. In the cases of Zimbabwe, Namibia and South Africa, independence or freedom in the 1980's and 1990's was the outcome of a combination of armed struggles and negotiated settlements. This brought an end to British-backed white minority rule in Zimbabwe, the Apartheid system of white minority rule and racial oppression in South Africa as well as South Africa's occupation of Namibia. It would, however, appear that in all cases, the social contract that underpinned the democratic struggles unraveled within the first decade of independence, while the political elite lapsed into authoritarianism as a strategy of monopolising power in the name of national unity and development. What we witnessed in the late 1980's and in the 1990's, therefore, was the re-emergence of the democratic struggles that were either subverted or betrayed by the post-independent political elite, or ambushed by the super power proxy games of the Cold War. Are there any guarantees that the newly won multiparty democracy will not go the way of the earlier version? Secondly, it is important to establish if the present democratisation process has led to the transfer of power to the people, and if not, and thirdly, to capture the implications of the non-transfer of power to the people for the democratic project in Africa.

2. The Tyranny of Choice(s)

The foregoing raises the related question of the kind of choice(s) that the present multiparty democracy offers African people. While some critics are quick to point out that it offers the people no real choice, others believe that it is the only choice the African people have in a unipolar post-Cold War world. It may then be apt to raise the question: did African people choose the present democracy, or was it imposed on them? It would appear that the issue lies in the ideological framework within which a particular type of democracy has been promoted in Africa. Several challenges emerge from this. Most important of all is the place of the people in the present democracy in Africa. Is this multiparty democracy inclusive, do elections give the people a real choice, or no choice? At some levels, it would appear that there is a tyranny of choice(s), with the people confronted with a particular type of democracy that they do not fully understand or relate to. They are also caught in the vortex of economic reform programmes that deepen poverty

and crush the middle class. In such contexts they are neither able to exercise power over the political process, or participate in it beyond voting during periodic elections. Even at that, the state, its institutions and the ruling party exerts a lot of influence on the electoral process, so that in most cases, elections actually offer people no real choice, or any opportunity to participate in the political process.

There is also another sense in which the people may vote for a political party, and by the same logic have no choice about the economic policies it adopts after assuming power. Although the people vote for political parties, the experience in Africa is that they do not have a say in the economic policies of elected governments. Increasingly, the economic policies adopted by Africa states tend to place accountability and power in the hands of external constituencies and a few local technocrats sometimes known as the 'dream team' that are obsessed with 'getting the prices right', no matter the adverse social impact involved. We are then increasingly confronted by the situation in which the economic logic overpowers the people's will, making nonsense of choices between different candidates that all end up implementing the same economic reforms that punish and disempower the poor people who are in the majority.

Across the continent, the evidence suggests that formal democracy has, since the initial euphoria of the early 1990's, progressively given way to the reduced participation of the people in politics. Increasingly, it is largely the same political elites and erstwhile dictators that have deodorized and repackaged themselves as 'new democrats', backed by an international community keen to promote economic reforms on the continent, that have accumulated power over the political process. Their attitude towards democracy has been ambivalent and opportunistic. In most cases, the political class has sought to bend democratic institutions to personal ends. Some have attempted to change the constitution to prolong their stay in power or exclude strong rivals from the contesting against them in elections. With links to the state and by virtue of belonging to patrimonial networks of power, it is this wealthy elite that has the structures and resources to mobilise support and resources to contest for elections and win.

Multiparty democracy in Africa has been for the affluent and the powerful, more a game of musical chairs in which various individual members of the political elite take their turns at the seat of power, but do not change the music. As the majority of Africa's people sink into further poverty, or are caught in the spiral of conflicts in the continent, they are prised out of politics, becoming mere spectators, or even worse, victims. Growing loss of faith in a democracy that does not improve the quality of life of Africa's people, alienation and apathy are contributing to a 'non-transition to democracy'

(Ihonvbere 1996). This empties politics of its democratic content, even while preserving the appearance of representativeness and accountability. Thus further endangering the few democratic gains, and raising the prospects for a democratic regression that would compound the crisis of development in which the continent is already immersed.

The issue of the participation of the people in politics, and the social changes they have the power to make are fundamental to the relevance and survival of democracy on the continent now, and in the years ahead. Democracy would have to address itself to the historical specificity of African countries as well as the challenge of being relevant to the well being of African people for it to grow deep roots, or make any real sense. A democracy that is inclusive of the people in a genuinely participatory sense is critical to Africa's unity and development. The challenge then is how to develop a democracy based on a radically new social contract with the people in Africa in the 21st century. With regard to this quest for a new democracy, there is a lot to be learnt from the thoughts and writings of Claude Ake, one of Africa's most accomplished political thinkers in the twentieth century. It is to these thoughts that we now turn.

3. Ake's Thoughts on Democracy and Development in Africa

Claude Ake devoted most of his thoughts and writings in the 1990's to the linkage(s) between democracy and development (Ake 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1996, 2000, 2001). Before this, he had been engaged with a critique of mainstream western social science from a perspective of radical political economy. His preoccupation was with constructing a political economy of Africa to overcome the limitations caused by the uncritical application of western social science paradigms to the study of Africa. In his view, western paradigms did not reflect the historical and cultural specificities of Africa, and ended up as what he once described as 'social science as imperialism.' Against the background of the crisis in development thinking, the impact of globalisation on Africa, and post-Cold war discourses on development and democracy, Ake turned his attention in the 1990's to the African democracy movement, and the critique of the wave of democratisation that was sweeping through Africa at the time (Ake 2000). Central to this was the characterisation of the democracy that was emerging as being distinct from, and inferior to African democracy, and the place of the people in both processes. From a historical perspective, he linked the African democracy movement to the social movements that waged the anti-colonial struggle and were a part

of the nationalist coalition that won independence in the 1960's only to be jettisoned by the political elite thereafter (Ake 1993a, 2000). This social movement was a historical force and an embodiment of the collective will, and the base of the democratic struggle against colonial exploitation and oppression. Therefore he linked the resurgence of the African democracy movement in the 1980's to the quest of African people for survival. In his view, democracy was a product of history. He was quite sceptical that the liberal democracy that was being promoted by the West in Africa was suited to the historical and social realities of the continent. In his words:

...the political arrangements of liberal democracy make little sense in Africa. Liberal democracy assumes individualism, but there is little individualism in Africa: it assumes the abstract universalism of abstract subjects, but in Africa that would apply only to the urban environment; the political parties of liberal democracy do not make sense in societies where associational life is rudimentary and interest groups remain essentially primary groups (Ake 1993a: 243).

In contrast, he argued that African democracy in a collective social sense offered a form of political participation that was different from and superior to that offered by liberal democracy. According to him, this was because the African notion of participation did not rest on the "assumption of individualism or conflicting interests, but on the social nature of human beings" (Ake 1993a: 243). Thus underlining the primacy being a part of a continuous process of decision-making, and of the collective will in securing 'concrete benefits.'

Ake was of the opinion that liberal democracy is different from the classic or Athenian notion of the rule of the people (Ake 2000: 7). Accordingly, it had become the rule of the bourgeoisie following the industrial revolution, and subsequently become the rule of the minority (Ake 2000: 9-12). He also noted that liberal democracy and the market shared the same values, thus creating a situation in which any real political participation was structured out of the process (Ake 2000: 26). This view comes out in his argument that liberal democracy had become trivialised "to the extent that it is no longer threatening to those in power or demanding to anyone" (Ake 1993b: A7). Thus, he argued that liberal democracy had displaced democracy, effectively rendering it as the rule of the oligarchy or the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie.

This partly explains why the African elite has appropriated it as a strategy or avenue to power that also advances its own interests (Ake 1993a: 239). Development agencies also see it as an asset for promoting market-led economic reforms on the continent. In the same vein, western governments see it as the opportunity to universalise the western model of democracy. He was also very critical of multiparty democracy, which he observed was not

emancipatory, and argued that it “offers people rights they cannot exercise, voting that never amounts to choosing, freedom which is patently spurious and political equality which disguises highly unequal power relations” (Ake 1993b: A9).

Another aspect of Ake’s thoughts on democracy revolved around the nature of the state in Africa. In his view the exploitative and authoritarian character of the colonial state had survived independence, military or one party rule, and even the emerging multiparty democracy. Lacking autonomy, the state was the context, as well as an actor in conflicts between competing factions of the political class, yet it held immense resources and power. As such the state was a vortex of struggles for power and resources, and politics was reduced to a zero-sum game in which the winners took everything and the losers also lost everything (Ake 1985, 2000: 37). Power was often personalised and abused, reducing politics to the single-minded pursuit of the capture of state power. This type of politics often led to ‘political monolithism’, the privatisation of power, the insecurity of those in power, and the lack of a developmental vision or intent on the part of leaders. A high premium was placed on the monopoly of power by a small group, to the exclusion of others defined in terms of ethnicity, religion, or region (Ake 2000: 38). Indeed, such politics rendered the notion of the state problematic with reference to Africa. It explained the violent nature of politics in most African countries and the proliferation of conflicts as the continuation of politics by violent means.

In relation to the prospects of democracy resolving such conflicts, he was quick to point out that one of the shortcomings of multi-partyism in Africa was that “it was blind to the character of the state” (Ake 1993b). Thus, outside the transformation of the state in Africa, little could be done to change the nature of politics. The crisis of underdevelopment in Africa is presented essentially as a political one, with African leaders lacking any real commitment to development and democracy (Ake 2000:36-37).

Perhaps, most critical of Ake’s discourses on politics in Africa, is his view that electoralism disempowers African people. This is described as the democratisation of disempowerment (Ake 2000: 82). He traces the dialectics of the African democratic movement to the interface between the demand for political incorporation by the African elite during the nationalist struggle, and the demands of the masses for economic incorporation after independence (Ake 2000: 37-51). Its more recent manifestation was evident from the demand for a second independence or the anti-SAP protests in various parts of Africa in the 1980’s. The political elite, through accommodationist and preventive strategies, resisted the democratic movement by adopting multi-partyism in the late 1980’s and 1990’s. The adoption of multi-partyism or a

‘trivialised form of democracy’ in which democratic institutions remained weak, and power was controlled by the few, ensured that the masses remained alienated from politics and power. In his words, “the absence of enabling conditions for democratic participation at the grassroots is the greatest obstacle to democracy in Africa, just as the transformation of society for the empowerment of ordinary people is the greatest challenge of democratisation” (Ake 1993b: A7). Ake’s contribution was thus hinged on two arguments, first that liberal democracy was not really democratic as it gives power to the few, and secondly that it was not relevant to the historical and socio-economic circumstances as well as the collective aspirations of the African people. On this basis he argued against the wholesale copying of the western model of democracy as the solution to Africa’s crises.

Ake believed that democratisation was both a social process and an unfinished business in Africa. His preference for social democracy was obvious. Ake argued that “the feasibility of democracy in Africa will depend crucially on how it relates to the social experience of Africans and how far it serves their social needs” (Ake 2000: 75). In this regard, his ideas ran counter to the dominant neo-liberal discourses on democracy in Africa, and the political conditionalities being promoted by the donor community and western countries in Africa. While these favoured reforms from above, Ake advocated transformation from below. He was critical of the African political class and seriously doubted the possibility of solutions framed within the neo-liberal paradigm solving the problem of underdevelopment in Africa. For him the utility of democracy lay in its centrality to a development process that has as its target the transformation of the social base of society.

Development therefore was a political project, but more fundamentally, it was a democratic project. Ake referred to the “democratisation of development and the development of democracy” (Ake 2000: 87-88). Both processes being underscored by the people being in power and directly participating in decision making. In his view, the most critical issue about the feasibility of democracy in Africa was the central role of the people as the agents of social transformation. This would also be dependent on the social content of, and not just the form of democracy. Thus while a popular form of democracy would empower the people, liberal democracy would disempower them. In his view, some of the qualities for a popular democracy would include its transformation to ensure that everyone participates as part of an interconnected whole in promoting the common good (Ake 2000: 184). His notion on participation rested, not on individuality, but on the “social nature of human beings” and “taking part in sharing the burdens and the rewards of community membership”. From a practical perspective he advocated that democracy had to be relevant to the African people, had to be developmental alongside the democratisation of the state, emphasise the decentralisation of

power and local autonomy and a consociational arrangement in which government would be a coalition of the authentic leaders of social groups (Ake 2000: 184-192; 2001: 132).

Ake's thoughts did address in a radical manner the challenge of democratisation as the solution to Africa's crisis of underdevelopment, the violent nature of politics, and debilitating cycle of violent conflicts: communal conflicts, civil wars, and regional wars that breed insecurity and undermine progress on the continent. Yet, it is important to note, that ultimately, he recognized the democracy in Africa was a highly contested and complex terrain. His contribution was to re-connect democratisation with the historical struggles of Africans for power, freedom and development.

4. No Choice, But Democracy: Political Reform in Africa and the Emerging Challenges

There is no doubt that Ake's critical thoughts have far-reaching implications for understanding the political reforms and democratic transitions that have taken place in Africa since the end of the 1980's. How do we begin to make sense of all this, and what options are feasible and sustainable? How far is the ideal from the ongoing political processes and practices in Africa? Can Africa's 'new democrats' deliver the goods? Has the continent completely broken free from an authoritarian past? There can be no easy answers bearing in mind the complex nature of politics, and the varieties of historical and social experiences within which democratic struggles have been waged in the different African countries. What is clear is that Africa's future will depend ultimately on the democratic outcomes of the on-going political and economic reform project that has been put in place across the continent.

The political reform process that ushered in multiparty democracy in Africa has been the subject of heated debates (Olukoshi 1998a). While some scholars have celebrated the transitions from authoritarianism to democratic rule as a positive development, others have criticised them for being elitist, and not addressing the interests of the grassroots, or even worse, for being 'non-transitions' (Ihonvbere 1996). The former point to the connection between the struggles for democracy by the civil society and the enthronement of democracy that guaranteed people their rights. Furthermore, they have noted that the expansion of the political space meant that hitherto excluded groups could now participate in the political process, while elections meant that leaders were now to account to their people, and could no longer rule in an arbitrary manner. There is no doubt that this position did have some merit

with regard to some African states, where the return to multiparty democracy created conditions within which the opposition was able to organise, and defeat incumbent ruling parties. This happened in Zambia, Senegal, Ghana, Malawi, and most recently in Kenya. Apart from the opening up of the political space, certain rights, particularly the freedom of expression and the rule of law have also meant that voices that were hitherto silenced could now speak up, and criticize the excesses of leaders, while acting as the voices of the opposition.

In this regard, Africa since the 1990's has witnessed the flowering of private media, particularly radio stations and newspapers that act as platforms for people to express themselves, and as alternative sources of news and information to the people. Such media as in the cases of Senegal, Ghana and Nigeria played important roles in the struggles for democratisation. In other instances, for example, Zimbabwe, the alternative media still operate under difficult circumstances, but they still continue to exist and disseminate alternative information to what the ruling party or government would rather want the people to believe.

In relation to the rule of law, the democratic constitutions do provide for the respect of fundamental human rights. Many civil society activists and opposition figures have been able to seek and gain protection for their right in the courts. Although the judicial process in most of Africa is still rather slow, and sometimes cumbersome, there has been some success in getting governments to respect the rights of their citizens, and accepting defeat after they lose elections. In the view of this school of thought, liberal democracy in Africa has opened up the democratic space for the people to participate in politics (Chole and Ibrahim 1995). What needs to be done is to strengthen the capacity of the people to participate in the process and ensure that the democratic institutions are autonomous and efficient.

In contrast, the critics of multiparty democracy are quick to argue that it has not led to the transformation of the dominant power relations on the continent. They also argue that elections do not offer the people any choice, leading Mkandawire (1996, 1999), to describe the phenomenon as 'choice-less democracies'. Ake is of the view that the political rights offered by liberal democracy are irrelevant to the masses, as they are unable to claim those rights, and are also denied economic and social rights by the same token. Their participation in elections is often symbolic; a gesture that in real terms is an investment in their own disempowerment (Ake 1995, 2000). Therefore, elections may provide the opposition access to power, but it does not change the power relations in society. According to this view, elections provide hitherto excluded politicians or members of the political elite with access to power, the state and its resources. Since they do not disagree with the nature

of the state or the political game itself, they end up implementing the same policies that alienate and disempower the people save for individual differences in style and intensity. Elections in this context may provide an opportunity for the opposition to take their turn to eat at 'the table of power', and not to upturn the table.

It is also pointed out that the members of the political elite that operate the fledgling political institutions on the continent are hardly democrats. With backgrounds in colonial rule, military/authoritarian one party rule, or raised within the centralist/command-style liberation movements, the new democrats are highly intolerant of criticism or opposition and tend to uphold the tested technique of personalising power. The culture of debate, compromise and consensus-building which are critical to the democratic process are often seen as signs of weakness by these new democratic converts, who tend to undermine political institutions and spawn a brand of governance that combines personal rule with patrimonialism. In this way, democratisation is deflected into narrow agendas as defined by those that manage to win, or steal elections. What the foregoing suggests is that multi-partyism has excluded the people from the political process, and therefore cannot be a sustainable and just basis for democratisation on the continent. One of the points on which the debate has been particularly heated is on the linkage between economic reform and democratisation.

5. Economic Reform and Democratisation: Prising the People Out of Politics?

The relationship between economic development and democracy has been a matter of great interest for some time. While there is a view that there is no linkage between the two, especially in the light of the 'Asian miracle', others are of the opinion that democracy is important for economic growth. In relation to Africa the discourse has largely been characterised by the debate between those who see democracy as the political framework that would ensure the success of market-based economic reform, and those that locate democracy in the opposition to such economic reforms that further impoverish and alienate an already traumatised people. The logic behind the linking of economic reform or structural adjustment to democratisation is broadly framed by the new political economy or public choice approach (Olukoshi 1998a). What it seeks to do is to promote market reforms that would de-link the corrupt state from the economy and promote political openness, accountability, transparency, and democratisation. It is believed that the market forces and private interests would run the economy much more efficiently,

and eliminate waste, while a genuine capitalist class autonomous of the state will emerge to better manage the political economy of African states. Such a class is also expected to provide a new corruption-free leadership for Africa's new democracies and better manage the liberated economies (Diamond 1988: 26-27).

A lot of studies framed from this perspective have sought to justify the need for new democracies by demonstrating the patrimonial and predatory character of African politics, its weak institutions and the corrupt nature of African states that preside over huge resources. In this regard, economic reform goes together with multiparty democracy that is expected to provide a political framework for the deregulation of the economy and the dissolution of patrimonial networks of power. Thus, there is a conflation of economic and political rationality and accountability that also cohere with the globalisation of neoliberal values and the triumph of capitalism over communism. This also feeds into the notion that Africa has no alternative but to democratise along the line that is regarded as internationally acceptable and legitimate.

In contrast to those pushing economic reform on the basis of its linkage with democratisation, some scholars have come out strongly to oppose the economic reform-democracy nexus. First of all they argue that, in terms of timing, economic reforms/structural adjustment in Africa was started under authoritarian regimes (Olukoshi 1998b). The adoption of the programmes did not involve any consultation with African people or critical constituencies such as labour, the poor and civil society. Even in the case of Nigeria, where a military regime allowed the people to debate the desirability of an IMF/World Bank reform package, it still went on to adopt it in 1986, after the people overwhelmingly rejected the package, arguing that what was adopted was a home-grown version.

For some time, the spokespersons of African governments parroted the TINA doctrine: There Is No Alternative to (the Structural Adjustment Programme) SAP, until it became clear that SAP had become a political liability in the 1990's. It has therefore been argued that in most of Africa, pressures for democratisation were driven, not by economic reform, but by opposition to it as a result of the harsh social consequences of its conditionalities and implementation. It led the people to question the legitimacy of leaders who through their misrule and repression had betrayed the promise of independence or what Olukoshi (2005: 198-99; 1998b), described as the "post-colonial social contract". This also links the resurgence of the democratic movement in Africa to the demand for a 'second independence', this time from African despots that had betrayed their people and impoverished them.

Another plank of opposition to economic reform was because it was seen as an external imposition. It provided leverage for the creditor institutions and their home governments to intervene directly in the African policy process by riding on the back of economic and political conditionalities. More often than not, these were designed to deregulate and further open up African economies in accordance with the rules of the market and provide political frameworks that would efficiently manage the economic reform process. Democracy provided both a framework for implementation and legitimisation of the reform process by elected African governments. It cannot hide, however, the fact that African people were not involved in discussing an economic programme that had far-reaching impacts on their lives, and that accountability for the implementation of economic reform resided outside Africa.

Part of the critique of economic reform was that it is anti-people, even in relation to its 'good governance' conditionalities that are seen as more directed at the efficient political management of market-led reforms than a form for transferring power to the people (Olukoshi 1998a: 35-52). This explained why its policies tended to focus not on the people, but on the market, expecting the benefits from the latter in contexts of extreme poverty and inequality to trickle down to the people. Yet, they were expected to tighten their belts and make sacrifices so as to be able to enjoy in the future. And while they bear the full social costs of economic austerity, social services and essential products like fuel and food are increasingly priced out of their reach, while the rich who had used their links with the state to accumulate wealth buy up the privatised enterprises in partnership with foreign investors. What then happens is that the gap between the rich and the poor in the continent continues to widen, while the poor discover that in spite of reforms they have been effectively priced out of the market. In the African context, where there is no social security and everyone looks up to the state that is fast shedding its welfare role, economic reform clearly threatens the social roots of democratisation. Also it is relevant to note that the emphasis on good governance as a conditionality of economic reform that is expected to engender market-led development in Africa also makes African governments adopt policies that please external constituencies, but alienate and marginalise domestic constituencies, thereby excluding them from the democratic process (Abrahamsen 2000: 132).

The contradiction between economic reform and political liberalisation has been further deepened by multiparty democracy. Democratic regimes have found it difficult to continue with economic reforms that are socially painful. Where they have continued to implement such programmes often under new names, these have led to the deepening of poverty, protests, the exacerbation of social tensions and the upsurge in conflicts along regional, religious, eth-

nic and communal lines. It has contributed to the outbreak of violence pitting 'indigenes' versus 'settlers', or 'citizens' versus 'foreigners' or ethnic minorities versus the state, as struggles between groups intensify in the face of dwindling resources (Obi 2004). The populace, anxious to get the democracy dividends in terms of an improved quality of life and material benefits, is sorely disappointed and alienated from the political process at the same time. Their being priced out of the economics also translates to being priced out of politics. Recent developments in Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire bear witness to how a combination of social contradictions unleashed by economic reforms and politics, can lead to a violent spiral of escalating tension and conflict. It would appear, then, that the linkage between economic reform and democratisation is problematic, and highly uneven across the continent, as can be observed, for example, in the often-mentioned success story of economic reform, Uganda, theoretically a no-party (but in practice a one-party) state, with power monopolised by the head of state and the National Resistance Movement. Even then, a much closer look at the success story would reveal that it is much more apparent than real.

The evidence across the continent is that almost two decades of economic reform have not addressed the roots of poverty and underdevelopment on the continent. As a result, it is undermining the social foundations upon which the second wave of democratisation was constructed in the 1990's. In this regard, it may be important to take another look at economic reforms so that they do not continue to undermine political gains and the legitimacy of multiparty democracy.

6. Africa: Political Opposition and the Limits of Electoralism

The question of choice is central to democracy. Elections are important to the democratic process, because they give the electorate the power to choose between different political parties and candidates offering different programmes. Elections give them the power of deciding how they are ruled and who rules them (representation). The acceptance of multi-partyism by Africa's erstwhile dictators after great internal agitation and protests, and pressures from the international community did provide an opportunity for the hitherto repressed opposition to canvass for power and provide African people with viable alternatives to decades of authoritarianism, misrule, corruption, and impoverishment. It also provided a platform for those who had, at great risk to their lives, led the protests against despotic regimes to offer an alternative leadership to the people.

As noted earlier, it was not in all cases that the opposition got into power. But they were able, within the liberalised political environment to participate in the political process. The opposition was made up of broad coalitions often drawn from civil society: labour, professional bodies, religious bodies, student unions, the press, other pressure groups and the human rights community. It also included those politicians that had been excluded from power, or had been expelled from, or lost out in the power struggles in the ruling party. The opposition usually drew their leadership from the political elite or civil society and often had a large following in the urban areas. Their politics was often framed in terms of providing a better alternative to the incumbent regimes.

However, in some instances, the opposition had links to the state or the ruling party. An often-cited case is that of Mobutu's Zaire, where the President under pressure from the international community was able to 'produce' opposition parties. In another case, a military ruler in Nigeria did legislate two parties into existence in the late 1980's based on the principle of 'equal founders and equal joiners'. His excuse was that he did not want the democratic process to be highjacked by those he described as 'money bags'. Thus the notion of the opposition has also been problematic and this has been further compounded by the limits of electoralism as an agent for political change.

Elections in Africa have been organised by electoral bodies that are essentially institutions of the state. These bodies have basically operated electoral systems inherited from colonialism, namely the Proportional Representation (PR) in Francophone and First Past the Post (FPTP) in Anglophone Africa (Southall 2003: 13). Although a debate has raged over each of the electoral systems with a view of determining, which is more useful, or whether to combine, or strike a balance between the two, it is clear that electoral systems cannot be dealt with outside of the larger political and socio-economic context. It should also be considered that appointments to the leadership of electoral bodies are made by the state or ruling party. The funding of these electoral bodies is largely controlled by the executive, which also has the leverage to influence the electoral rules.

Most of the parliaments on the continent are ineffectual in influencing the electoral process, while even the opposition in parliament is either fighting for survival or suffocated by the hegemony of the executive or the majority party. Either way, elections take place on an uneven playing field, under electoral institutions whose neutrality do not extend beyond the shadow of the state, or in some cases, the ruling party.

The role of international observers and local monitors in lending credibility to the electoral process is at best symbolic, as no elections have ever been cancelled for lacking credibility on the basis of observer reports. In some cases, international observers become part of the post-election crises when they are either accused of bias or produce imprecise reports. Given these circumstances, elections tend to short-change the people, and feed into apathy and powerlessness.

While the opposition in Africa did achieve a measure of victory when it won the struggle for the right to organise, and contest for power, it has over time also been divided by its own internal contradictions. The leadership of the opposition movement has been drawn from the elite and is highly personalised. This tends to foster a lot of competition for the leadership, and fractionalisation within the opposition coalitions. There are often accusations that the leadership of these groups is hardly transparent or accountable to their followers, and usually focus all their attention on winning elections with two likely outcomes. They could disintegrate before elections when disagreements emerge over who will lead the opposition and be the Presidential candidate of the opposition as happened in the elections in Cameroon in 2004. On the other hand, it could happen after elections are lost, and there is no unifying focus and some members break ranks to join the ruling party and accept political appointments. In cases when the opposition wins elections and comes into power, it is often engaged in the politicking related to the sharing of political appointments and the spoils of office.

At another level, opposition politics faces the real risk of being tied to the rising tide of ethnicity. Sometimes the opposition has been linked to the agitation by certain regions, ethnic or minority groups that have been excluded from the political process. This in itself may not be a negative development, but it can be manipulated to sow social tensions and divert the attention of the opposition movement from democratisation. This much was evident in the crises that followed the annulment of the 1993 Nigerian Presidential elections, widely believed to have been won by Moshood Abiola from south-west Nigeria, by then military President General Ibrahim Babangida, from the northern part of the country. In spite of the fact that the winner had defeated his opponent in his home region in the North, the subsequent ethnification of the protests eventually reduced the opposition to a largely South-west, or Yoruba affair.

The reverse side of the coin is the case where an opposition movement largely associated with a region or ethnic group comes into power, and the elite sees this as their own opportunity to 'eat' at the table of power. Apart from the exclusion of erstwhile office holders from political patronage, the new struggles for access alienate or exclude other sections of the populace.

In the process, democracy is increasingly depoliticized, and becomes a competition or route to power. The opposition movement confuses its quest for power with an ideology, and increasingly divides or demobilises the people who no longer see any real benefits for themselves in national politics. Even when it manages to organise the people, it does not do so in a sustained manner or for a transformatory agenda. Politics becomes more about personalities, communal/ethnic/regional/religious interests and less about issues and development. The more things seem to change, the more they seem to remain the same.

What the foregoing suggests is that opposition politics in Africa is led by a political elite that neither has an ideology for fundamental political change, nor one for the transformation of the state. Either way, it is a movement that cannot be separated from the social contradictions in which Africa is immersed. It is both reflective and symptomatic of the power relations that have been dominant in Africa over the decades. In a critical sense, it is not the entrepreneurial or capitalist class that has emerged from almost two decades of market-led economic reforms on the continent. Rather, it mirrors the same political class that captured political office at independence, only this time it is dressed in democratic robes, and speaks the language of democracy. Again, the signs are obvious that the African masses are not at the centre of opposition politics led by political elites that have no fundamental disagreement with the system. At elections they are confronted with selecting one individual out of the same political elite, sometimes settling for the 'devil they know', but most times lacking any real say.

In spite of multi-partyism, dreams of a new democratic Eldorado of life more abundant for all appears to recede further in African countries where the opposition has come to power, or those cases such as Togo, Gabon and Cameroon, where incumbents have perfected the art of landslide electoral victories. In the wake of the failure of elections to provide the people with a real choice in most parts of Africa, Ake's thoughts continue to ring true. What next? A struggle for a Third Independence?

7. Conclusion: Is a Third Independence Possible?

From the foregoing, it can be gleaned that the struggle for democracy in Africa has not ended, in spite of the triumph of multi-partyism in the 1990's. Over a decade of multi-partyism has shown its advances as well as limitations, even in the context of its uneven implementation across the continent. While those in support of the 'new democracy' are of the view that it is too

early to judge the current efforts in Africa harshly, considering that it took the democracies of Europe and the United States centuries to get to their present levels, their critics are of the view that Africa's historical and socio-economic realities clearly dictate that it cannot, and must not seek to replicate the teleology of the march of Western civilisation. While accepting that democracy is a universal value that is good for everyone, it should be recognised that local conditions and realities have a place in modifying and particularising the universal. The challenge is not to tropicalise democracy, even if this temptation is perhaps overwhelming, but to return it to the basics, that is, when the people control power.

The challenge before Africans is how to deepen democracy, and to prevent it from regressing and becoming a caricature that merely seeks to satisfy the conditionalities of donors and win legitimacy from the international community. Politics disembowelled of its democratic content and which continues to exclude the African poor who constitute the majority, will in the long run be as much of a threat to Africa, as it would be to the international system. There is also the real possibility that democratic regression can lead to chaos, militarism and mindless political violence on the continent. The military and other militia groups are not too far away waiting to prey on the people should the semblance of democratic order collapse.

The signs are all too clear to see. Multi-partyism in the early 1990's opened up the political space and raised the expectations of the African people for a new dawn of social justice, equality, dignity and a better life. It led in the most part to the removal of discredited dictators, and forced others to open up the political space to the opposition that had been hitherto banned, repressed or exiled. Yet, it was a limited opening whose democratic outcome reflected the balance of forces on the ground. While in some cases, despots fell immediately from power, in others it took longer. But some survived and even gained democratic legitimacy for their dictatorships. But the real issue was that it sometimes appeared that elections had merely brought new oppressors to power. However, what is true in all cases is that multi-partyism did not dampen the high premium placed on political power by the power elite, nor did it reduce the reality that, most often, winning elections remained a matter of life or death. Those who won monopolised the political prize, while those that lost often cried foul, and were effectively excluded from power.

The new democratic governments have also been hamstrung by economic reform packages imposed from outside and which tend to undermine or cancel the social gains that democracy would have brought to bear on the political process. Economic reforms pose very serious problems for the legitimacy of the state, social consensus and cohesion so critical to the success of de-

mocracy. Unfortunately, most 'new democrats' and their technocrats, wedded to the conditionalities of economic reform as preached by the Bretton Woods Institutions, often miss the point thus contributing to the overheating of the political system. In seeking to contain the stress on the political system the 'democratic' state resorts to coercion and the politics of exclusion as it attempts to hang on to power while retaining the mantle of a faithful economic reformer. It strains itself to impress the external constituency—the International Financial Institutions and Donors, so as to keep credit lines open and aid flowing. In this regard, the people are alienated by economic policies and the fragile democratic institutions are unable to manage the tensions arising from socio-economic contradictions. This is a paradox that paralyzes the democratic process and shows up the anti-people under belly of the governance and the policy process. A process that prizes the people from the economy and political participation cannot be a sustainable basis for democracy in Africa.

The preceding suggests that there will have to be a struggle for a third independence for African people. The first was against colonialism, the second against internal dictatorship, and the third will be directed at transforming the democracy from above to one from below. For except power returns to the people in a concrete sense, African cannot enjoy the full dividends of democracy. More importantly, the people have to control the states in Africa, and transform them into agencies for the collective will and development within the framework of a new equitable people-centred social contract. Yet, Africans cannot afford to ignore the realities of multiparty democracy as the only game in town, nor can the world continue to shut its eyes and ears to the contradictions in—and the very severe pains that—the policies it promotes in the continent directly or indirectly inflict on the people.

While noting that African people have largely been the victims of a hegemonic political class, it is also important to note the internal contradictions within the people themselves and how they are easily divided, and co-opted by narrow or diversionary elitist agendas. This will require more studies and an alternative ideology of political mobilisation and social transformation. For African people are not yet a ready-made social force for an emancipatory popular democracy. How African people can use the openings offered by multi-partyism to take power over the democratic project will constitute the greatest challenge of the 21st century. But to return democracy to being the rule of the people, by the people, and for the people, will ultimately depend on the level of organisation of grassroots or popular social forces and their struggles against those forces that underdevelop Africa.

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Dr Cyril Obi is currently Coordinator of the Research Programme on Post-Conflict Transition, the State and Civil Society in Africa, at the Nordic Africa Institute (NAI) in Uppsala. He is presently on leave from the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs (NIIA), Lagos, where he is an Associate Research Professor. Before joining NAI in 2005, Cyril had been a guest and a visiting researcher there in 1999 and 2004. In 2004, Dr Obi became the second Claude Ake Professor. Prior to this, he had received international recognition/awards as a Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) Governance Institute fellow in 1993, fellow of the Salzburg Seminar in 1994, SSRC-MacArthur Foundation visiting fellow in 1996, visiting fellow to the Africa Studies Centre (ASC), Leiden in 1998, and visiting fellow to St. Antony's College Oxford in 2000. In 2001, he was a fellow of the 21st Century Trust, Conference on "Rethinking Security for the 21st Century", also held at Oxford. He has over a hundred publications, comprising edited books, monographs, journal articles and chapter contributions, some of which have been translated into French, Arabic, Italian, Norwegian, German and Spanish. Dr. Obi is a contributing editor to the *Review of African Political Economy* (RoAPE), published by the Taylor & Francis Group in the UK—he also serves on the editorial boards of several other academic journals. He is active in the networks of the Nigerian Political Science Association (NPSA), African Association of Political Science (AAPS), CODESRIA, and international academic networks in Europe and North America. Like many African and Nigerian Political Scientists of his generation, Cyril Obi has been influenced by the writings and reflections of Claude Ake on Africa's political economy, and inspired by his activism and commitment to the liberation of the people of the continent.

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Abstract

The paper posits that the struggle for democracy in Africa has not ended, in spite of the triumph of multi-partyism in the 1990's. While those in support of the 'new democracy' are of the view that it is too early to judge the current efforts in Africa harshly, considering the centuries it took for the 'advanced democracies' of Europe and North America centuries to get to their present levels, their critics are of the view that Africa's historical and socio-economic realities clearly dictate that it cannot, and must not seek to replicate the teleology of Western civilisation, particularly its democratic trajectory. A hegemonic African elite and its transnational partners have disembowelled democracy of its popular-participatory content and co-opted it as an ideological tool to facilitate the expropriation of the continent's vast resources and pursue related geo-strategic interests. While accepting that democracy is a universal value that is good for everyone, it should be recognised that local conditions and realities have a place in modifying, contextualizing and particularising the universal. The present forms of neo-liberal democracy being promoted on the continent, as a part of a hegemonic universalizing global project, while providing a legitimizing pretext for African elites to capture and retain power, disempowers and offers the majority of the people no real choice. The real challenge lies in returning power and ensuring social justice, and equitable redistribution of resources to the people, through a transformatory process that would empower the masses to take control of the democratic project in the real sense of freely creating a government of the people, for the people, by the people.