

# A CASE FOR DEMOCRACY



Africa had a coup problem. According to Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, the continent accounts for 214 of the 486 attempted or successful global coups from 1950. It accounted for 106 of the 242 successful ones.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, 45 of the 54 African nations have experienced at least one coup attempt since 1950.

In recent years, the continent appeared to rid itself of the virus. For instance, in the decade to 2021, Africa recorded less than one successful coup per year.<sup>2</sup> However, the continent has seen 13 coup attempts in the last three years, with eight as successful. In 2021, there were six coup attempts, with four successful, while in 2022, there were five coup attempts, with two successful. In the nine months of 2023, Africa recorded

two successful coup attempts. According to António Guterres, UN Secretary-General, “military coups are back.”<sup>3</sup> No cancer is a welcome development.

Given the continent’s poor economic performance under democratic regimes, several commentators argue that democracy has failed. Some commentators say that countries should be able to try other options. Winston Churchill’s quip that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all the others” appears to be losing its converts. The “benevolent dictator” argument resurfaces as Paul Kagame continues to deliver results astounding his African contemporaries.<sup>4</sup>

While understandable, the case for

illiberal governments is untenable. While authoritarian regimes may deliver economic growth rates that supersede what democracies can achieve in the short run, the outcomes are usually unsustainable. The “Asian Tigers” present compelling examples but also demonstrate the unsustainability of such results.<sup>5</sup> China’s phenomenal economic growth rate in the four decades from 1980 is often referenced to validate the case for such illiberal governments. Indeed, some authors are already projecting a future [“When China Rules the World”](#) or when the rest of us will live in [“The World According to China.”](#)

China’s economic performance – as a core argument for illiberal governments – is no longer tenable. China’s prospects are dimming. Its economic growth has slowed from an average of 10 percent in the three decades from 1978 to 7.1 percent in the decade to 2020. Australia’s Lowy Institute forecasts a 2 to 3 percent annual growth for China until 2050. The reasons are apparent. President Xi Jinping has secured complete control of the Chinese Communist Party with little limits on his powers. He stacked the Politburo Standing Committee with his loyalists, eliminating opposing views on bad policies. An example is the ill-conceived “zero-COVID” policy that resulted in significant economic costs. Xi has doubled down on repression and censorship to curtail any opposition

voices. His strong hand is tightening over the private sector and leaders of science and the economy.

China’s problems typify most illiberal governments. Operating outside democracy’s restraints, the government deliver strong economic growth. However, with no independent voices, those governments eventually self-sabotage. Innovation, if it ever existed, will slow down. Hubris will set in. The economic growth, for which the populace was willing to tolerate attacks on their civil liberties, will eventually slow down and may even reverse. The “benevolent dictator” will become more dictatorial to hold on to power. The people will suffer as they come around to appreciating Churchill’s quip.

Is there any benefit to the coup scare? Maybe. With the decline of coups, African politicians carried on as if they were accountable to no one. They are unaccountable to anyone as they use rigged elections to sanctify their rot. They took solace in the assumption that Western governments would assist them in repelling the coupists. Unsurprisingly, Ali Bongo’s response to his removal from office was to call on his foreign friends to “make noise.” However, it is dawning on such leaders that no cavalry is waiting to advance and perpetuate them in power. Hopefully, this realisation will cause the leaders to

<sup>1</sup> Powell, Jonathan & Clayton Thyne (2011). [Global Instances of Coups from 1950-Present](#). Journal of Peace Research 48(2):249-259.

<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> United Nations (2021). [Solidarity ‘Missing in Action’, Secretary-General Tells General Assembly, Decrying ‘Malady of Mistrust’ while Stressing: ‘We Must Get Serious’](#). Press Release. United Nations. September 21, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Russel, S. (2012). [The Benevolent Dictatorship in Rwanda: Negative Government, Positive Outcomes?](#). The Applied Anthropologist Vol. 32, No. 1, 2012: 12-22

<sup>5</sup> The Economist (2019) [After half a century of success, the Asian tigers must reinvent themselves](#).

reassess their actions and seek regime protection from the masses.

Africa's democracy is fractured. Yet, it holds the elements critical for Africa's development. For this statement to be accurate, the people must retain the power to vote in and out their preferred politicians. The continent must recommit itself to democratic principles. However, given that rams do not vote for Sallah, there is a need for "veto players" to force the government to fix its democracy.

Regional power blocs like the African Union (AU), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and others must compel African leaders to be more transparent and accountable. The tenets of democracy should be upheld, and disregard for the rule of law must be sanctioned. If ECOWAS is ready to send in soldiers to unseat coupists, they should be prepared to sanction any politicians that rig elections. The same energy the regional power bloc and international community use to speak against coupists

can be channelled to democratic African leaders with dictatorial and illiberal styles of governance to forestall further coups.

Democracy, as evident in the West and most of the global north, makes a good case for development. Few exceptions have skewed the intended purpose of democracy: people-driven, participatory and inclusive growth. Despite a few glimpses of unsustainable achievements, illiberal governments and benevolent dictators will never drive prosperity and development in Africa. The coups in Africa could be a watchdog to democratic leaders to sit up or face the music. The people must be part of the process. Unlike in the past, performance and governance validations must come from the people, not the colonialists.