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Editorial Note

This issue of *AYIKA* brings together a rich and timely collection of scholarship that underscores a central truth: in Africa, environmental questions are deeply political, and political realities are increasingly shaped by environmental change. The contributions in this volume reflect the growing complexity of this relationship, engaging themes that span governance, technology, security, sustainability, and identity across diverse African contexts and beyond.

A defining feature of this issue is its strong engagement with the role of digitalisation in advancing sustainability. From the systematic review on how digitalisation enables decarbonisation, to analyses of agri-tech adoption in Nigeria and South Africa, the volume highlights the transformative potential of technology in addressing environmental challenges. These contributions move beyond optimism, carefully examining the mechanisms and constraints that shape technological uptake. They remind us that digital solutions are not neutral; their effectiveness depends on policy frameworks, institutional capacity, and socio-economic conditions.

Equally prominent is the question of governance, particularly in relation to service delivery and institutional performance. The examination of water service failures in Gauteng Province offers a sobering account of how governance lapses can translate into environmental and public health crises. Similarly, the discussions on public service reform and parliamentary oversight reveal the persistent challenges of accountability and administrative effectiveness across the continent. Together, these studies point to a critical insight: sustainable environmental outcomes are contingent on capable, transparent, and responsive institutions.

The issue also engages deeply with questions of political order, security, and regional cooperation. Analyses of Zimbabwe's political history, hybrid regimes in Central Africa, and border conflicts involving Nigeria reveal how political instability and governance structures shape environmental management and development trajectories. The exploration of indivisible security within the SADC region further highlights the interconnectedness of peace, cooperation, and sustainable development. These contributions reinforce the idea that environmental sustainability cannot be pursued in isolation from broader political and security dynamics.

Another important strand in this volume is the emphasis on economic strategies and livelihoods, particularly in rural contexts. Articles on organic agribusiness, marketing strategies aligned with climate action, and the challenges faced by women in agribusiness illuminate the everyday realities of sustainability. They foreground the experiences of local actors, especially women entrepreneurs, whose resilience and innovation are often overlooked. By examining the socio-economic factors shaping revenue growth and participation, these studies contribute to a more inclusive understanding of development.

The volume also makes a significant intellectual contribution by foregrounding indigenous knowledge systems and alternative epistemologies. The exploration of

Ubuntu as a framework for regional governance offers a human-centred perspective that challenges dominant policy paradigms. Similarly, the critique of epistemic violence in transboundary conservation highlights the marginalisation of local knowledge and agency. These interventions are particularly important in rethinking whose knowledge counts in environmental governance and how more equitable frameworks can be developed. Urban spaces and cultural expressions are not left out of this conversation. Contributions on city branding in Harare and the intersection of art, space, and identity in Durban demonstrate how environmental and political dynamics are experienced and expressed in urban contexts. These studies expand the scope of environmental politics by incorporating cultural and spatial dimensions, offering fresh insights into how cities in the Global South are responding to climate change.

Notably, this issue also extends its analytical reach beyond Africa, with a study on urban climate initiatives in Brazil and a comparative examination of socio-economic vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific Islands. These contributions enrich the volume by situating African experiences within a broader global context, encouraging cross-regional learning and dialogue.

Finally, the inclusion of research on language and education, such as the study on tense substitution errors among Tshivenda-speaking students, serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of knowledge production, communication, and development. It highlights the importance of education in shaping the capacity to engage with complex environmental and political issues.

Taken together, the articles in this issue reflect a vibrant and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. They challenge simplistic narratives and instead offer nuanced analyses that recognise the interconnected nature of environment and politics in Africa. As the continent continues to navigate the pressures of climate change, population growth, and political transformation, the insights presented here are both timely and necessary. This volume invites scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to think more critically and act more collaboratively. It is our hope that the conversations sparked within these pages will contribute to more just, sustainable, and context-sensitive approaches to environmental governance in Africa and beyond.

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TABLE OF CONTENT

1. How Digitalisation Enables Decarbonisation: A Systematic Review Of Mechanisms, Pathways, And Boundary Conditions
Misheck Musaigwa, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza
6-27
2. Lapses in Water Services Management Within Gauteng Province- A Scoping Review Of Hammanskraal Water Woes
M. Diedericks, S. Sikwela, G.M. Solomons
28-57
3. Soldiered Democracy and Peace: The Smithan Syndrome Of Politics And Administration In Zimbabwe, 1965–2018
Timothy Chibuike Anyanwu, Kelechi Johnmary Ani
58-76
4. Aligning Marketing Strategies with Climate Action and Sustainable Development Goals in South Africa
Gugulethu Mhlanga and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj
77-98
5. Agri-Tech And Livestock Management: Economic And Policy Drivers Of Digital Adoption In Nigeria And South Africa
Olukayode Idris Lasisi, Bisiriyu Abiodun Taleat, Muslim Akinbola Akintola Kedibone Phago
99-119
6. Indivisible Security And Sustainable Development In The Sadc Region: Assessing Stability And Cooperation Among The Drc, Rwanda, And Uganda
Masila Joshua Masipa
120-134
7. Reforming Public Service In Africa: Strategies, Challenges And The Future
Kazeem Oyedele Lamidi, Costa Hofisi
135-156
8. Organic Agribusiness In Rural South Africa: Marketing Strategies Amid Stiff Competition
Ishmael Obaeko Iwara
157-16
9. Minimising English Tense Substitution Errors: A Case Of Tshivenda-Speaking Students At A South African University
Farisani Thomas Nephawe
168-185
10. Institutional Dynamics And Hybrid Regime: Liberal And Authoritarian Democracy In The Central Africa
Muhlya Tshombe Lukamba, Bisiriyu Abiodun Taleat, Eunice Chesa
186-206
11. Ubuntu Philosophy And Regional Governance In Africa: A Human-Centred Framework For Regional Integration And Sustainable Development
Onuk Bulus Ojem, Phemelo Olifile Marumo
207-226

12. Nigerian Border Conflict With Neighbours And Implications For Regionalism
Kelechi Johnmary Ani

227-239
13. Epistemic Violence: Transboundary Conservation's Subjugation Of Basubiya
 Eco-Missiology And Riverine Agency
Phemelo Olifile Marumo, Sethunya Michael Gaarekwe

240-262
14. Strategies To Mitigate The Challenges Faced By Women In Agribusinesses In
 Rural Uphongolo, Kwazulu-Nata
Ndlangamandla, Wiseman Siboniso

263-283
15. In What Ways Do Intersecting Socio-Economic Factors Shape Revenue Growth
 Among Rural Women Entrepreneurs in KZN, South Africa?
Lindokuhle Senamile Ntuli, Innocent Simphiwe Nojiyeza

284-307
16. Climate Change and Socio-Economic Vulnerability in Sub-Saharan Africa and
 Pacific Islands
Mandisa Jili and Andrisha Beharry-Ramraj

308-328
17. Transformative city branding in the face of climate change in the global south:
 A case of Harare
Kazaka Chiyambire

329-349
18. Mapping of urban climate initiatives in Brazil: promoting mitigation and
 adaptation in the transport sector
***Ana Clara Vieira Pedrosa, Ana Clara de Roure, Mateus Bernardino Mata,
 Andréa Souza Santos***

350-378
19. Ancestral Voices in Modern Crises: Traditional Leadership and Climate
 Adaptation in Zimbabwe
Douglas Nyathi

379-396

INSTITUTIONAL DYNAMICS AND HYBRID REGIME: LIBERAL AND AUTHORITARIAN DEMOCRACY IN THE CENTRAL AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper discusses the institutional dynamics that support the co-existence of liberal and authoritarian democracy in Central Africa with special attention to Cameroon, Gabon and the Central African Republic. Political systems in the region are still marked with autocratic traits even after the formalization of democratic institutions like multiparty elections, constitutions and legislatures. The research design is qualitative as it relies on descriptive examination of academic sources, policy reports and institutional reports. It relies on comparative case study approach to examine how formal democratic institutions are frequently subverted by executive powers, poor judicial autonomy, restricted civil rights and political pluralism. Thematic analysis revealed that these regimes are hybrid systems, with democratic process being upheld only to gain legitimacy, and substantive governance being authoritarian. The results also demonstrate that authoritarian resilience is strengthened by structural factors including resources dependency, poor state institutions and the effect of external geopolitics. The paper concludes that democratic consolidation in Central Africa is weak and lop-sided with little achievement beyond procedural democracy. It suggests institutional reforms, greater involvement of civil societies and greater regional and international accountability mechanisms to foster real democratic governance and sustainable development in the region.

Keywords: Governance, Democracy, liberalism, authoritarianism, dictatorship, autocracy,

Introduction

Political geography in the Central African region is a complex issue of liberal and authoritarian forms of democracy, which are a manifestation of the international conflict over governance, legitimacy, and state capacity. These dynamics are vital to the understanding of the challenges that are still facing the region of political stability, human rights, and socio-economic development. African nations have undergone significant political changes over the last three decades, transitioning from one-party systems and military dictatorships to diverse forms of electoral and constitutional democracy. This, of course, has not been a straight line of change in Central Africa. Rather, it is typified by weak liberal democracies and authoritarian democracies with strong institutions and autocratic behaviours (Cheeseman, 2015). In the broadest meaning, democracy refers to a political model where the power to govern is based on the will of the governed expressed by way of participation, representation and accountability (Dahl, 1971). The ideal form of democracy, known as liberal democracy, focuses on civil liberties, political pluralism, rule of law, checks and balances and competitive elections as a source of legitimate authority (Diamond, 2019). On the other hand, authoritarian democracy, also called competitive authoritarianism or elections with autocracy, is an amalgamation of formal democratic systems in conjunction with autocratic rule; here, elections take place, but this time, they are influenced to make the dominant leader(s).

The hope that liberal democracy was going to flourish in Africa was

produced by the wave of democratisation that poured into Africa following the cessation of the Cold War in the early years of the 1990s. The international discussion of human rights, donor conditionalities and domestic pressures to transform the constitutions to be democratic and organize multiparty elections forced most of the African governments to adopt democratic constitutions and organise multiparty elections (Gyimah-Boadi, 2007). Nonetheless, whereas the development of some nations in West and Southern Africa was enormous in reaching democratic consolidation, most of the countries in Central Africa had been in democratic regression or pseudo-democratic development. This lopsided development has seen researchers describe this region as a hybrid zone of liberal and authoritarian inclinations (Erdmann, 2011). Central Africa, including Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic (CAR), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of Congo, are historically influenced by colonial and post-independent politics over the control of the state. Colonial experience brought about centralized administrative forms, a lack of institutional checks, and reliance of the economies on outside powers (Young, 2004). Following the 1960s, most Central African states began to adopt one-party government or military regimes, and the leaders in those countries deemed themselves as national leaders who united the country. Political power came over time to be personalised, and state institutions were used as a means of consolidation of the elite instead of accountability to the people (Bayart, 2009).

This changed in the 1990s, as democratisation pressures were felt

throughout Africa. Several Central African nations adopted new constitutions and had multiparty elections. These reforms, however, did not contribute much to the overall reduction of authoritarian dominance in the name of democratisation. In the example of Cameroon, a government led by Paul Biya since 1982, in 1992, he opened up the multiparty elections, but retained a strong grip on the state structures and election proceedings (Takougang & Krieger, 1998). Equally, Omar Bongo and subsequently his son, Ali Bongo Ondimba, maintained power in Gabon, following corruptly organised elections and a lobby system (Yates, 2015). Equatorial Guinea, under the rule of Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, is one of the longest authoritarian regimes, even though the country holds regular elections that lack transparency or competitiveness (Liniger-Goumaz, 2000). As such, the appearance of the language and formalities of democracy is present, but the contents are authoritarian.

The democracy in Central Africa is a weaker and institutionalised form of democracy that is based on institutional weakness, limited political culture and widespread corruption. The liberal democratic model demands an effective civil society, an independent judicial system, a free press and a competitive party system (Diamond, 2019). However, in most of the states in Central Africa, these institutions are either weak or are taken over by the ruling elites. The absence of democratic culture and clientelism is the reason why liberal democratic norms cannot be consolidated (Posner and Young, 2007). In the case of the Central African Republic, coups, rebel activities and foreign influence have caused repeated

democratic breakdowns of the country (Mehler, 2011). Security crisis, poor state institutions, and politics based on identity have usually derailed the efforts to establish a liberal democracy. Likewise, in Chad, despite the presence of multiparty elections, the political environment is still controlled by the executive and the opposition parties are harassed and marginalised (Debos, 2016).

As it is reflected in Central Africa, authoritarian democracy is a type of hybrid government in which the leaders keep the electoral processes to justify their rule but manage to weaken the competition, equity and limit civil freedom systematically. These systems are based upon the combination of coercion, co-optation and international legitimacy to stabilise themselves (Schedler, 2013; Levitsky and Way, 2010). The electoral commission is frequently dominated by the ruling elite; constitutions are always manipulated to set aside the term limits; and the state resources are regularly used to control political competition. This has been termed as democratisation without democracy (Carbone, et. al., 2023).

Consequently, it is important and timely to say that an examination of liberal and authoritarian democracy in the Central African region is conducted. A study of this nature will lead to the knowledge of the structural and behavioural determinants of regime type in the Central African region. It will also assist in understanding why liberal democracy is a moving and evasive force and why authoritarian democracy is enduring despite having global and internal demands of change. The study will address the gap in the African political literature that remains to be

critical and offer a policy intervention that can bring forth democratic governance and accountability by providing a systematic comparison of political institutions, leadership behaviour, and citizen engagement among the Central African states.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Democracy has been the dominant focus of political theory, comparative politics, and international relations. The essence of democracy is that it is a system of government whereby the people are the source of political power, which is exercised either directly or indirectly using an elected official (Held, 2006). Democracy is, however, not a monolithic idea; it comes in various forms, contingent on institutionalisation, socio-political realities and historical developments. Two distinguishable ones are liberal and authoritarian democracy. These models describe the conflict between idealistic views of democracy and realistic demands of governance.

The theoretical and conceptual frameworks of liberal democracy and authoritarian democracy help to cast light on the spectrum of democratic governance as it is practised. The prevalent normative model of democratic governance is liberal democracy based on constitutionalism, rights and pluralism. Authoritarian democracy, on the contrary, is a hybrid variant that steals the symbols of democracy and limits their content, focusing power instead of freedom. These frameworks are critical to the analysis of the modern political mechanisms, particularly in the areas of the world where democracy is undergoing a serious challenge and

redesign. Finally, when discussing these frameworks, we need to mention the tension between the ideals of popular sovereignty and the actualities of political control. Therefore, the current research study offers a conceptual and theoretical understanding of liberal democracy and authoritarian democracy with emphasis on the philosophical basis, institutional processes, and theoretical basis of both democracy types.

The most common and practised form of democracy in the present-day world is liberal democracy. In principle, it combines two traditions: liberalism and democracy. Whereas liberalism focuses on individual rights, constitutionalism, rule of law, and limited government, democracy focuses on collective participation, majority rule and political equality (Zakaria, 1997). Thus, liberal democracy can be characterised as the political regime in which free and fair elections exist along with the consideration of the basic rights and freedoms, the division of powers and the independence of the judicial branch. Robert Dahl and his concept of polyarchy reflect the institutional circumstances of liberal democracy: the inclusive membership, the competition among political elites, the freedom of expression, the access to alternative information sources, and the associational independence (Dahl, 1971).

Moreover, authoritarian democracy seems to be a paradox, because authoritarianism and democracy cannot be used interchangeably. However, the term is used to describe political regimes whereby aspects of democracy are in combination with dictatorial behaviour (Diamond, 2002). We can define authoritarian democracy by the

idea that the rulers gain legitimacy by means of controlled elections and popular participation and monopolise power in a manner that restricts political pluralism, civil liberties and checks and balances (Levitsky and Way, 2010). In this system, the citizens can have a formal input in elections, but opposition parties, civil societies and the media are suppressed. Although authoritarian democracy permits the extent of popular legitimacy, it essentially places the rights and liberties of individuals under the state or the governing institution (Zakaria, 1997).

Nevertheless, there are criticisms of the two frameworks. Liberal democracy has been criticised as elitist, emphasising procedures (elections) rather than equality, and failing to cope with the growth of populism (Mounk, 2018). Authoritarian democracy, on the other hand, is condemned, in that it is seen to compromise basic freedoms, facilitate corruption, and authoritarianism masquerades as democratic involvement (Diamond, 2002). According to some scholars, authoritarian democracy is neither democracy nor is it a form of authoritarianism but a variation of the latter (Zakaria, 1997). Some others insist that it is a changing world trend whereby democratic types are being hijacked to justify non-liberal governments (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

The theoretical basis of liberal democracy can be traced to Enlightenment scholars like John Locke, Montesquieu and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Locke stressed natural rights and government through consent (Locke, 1689/1988), and Montesquieu developed the doctrine of the separation

of powers as a means of preventing tyranny (Montesquieu, 1748/1989). Rousseau provided the concept of popular sovereignty, but his form of it focused on the will of the collectivist, rather than individual rights (Rousseau, 1762/1997).

Furthermore, the theoretical perspective of authoritarian democracy is based on the criticism of liberalism, and the concept of democracy should be localised to cultural, historical, or stage of developmental backgrounds (Zakaria, 1997). This model is enlightened by several theoretical perspectives. The hybrid regime theory is used to describe how authoritarian democracies can be perpetuated by a combination of democratic institutions and authoritarian procedures formed to establish competitive authoritarianism (Levitsky and Way, 2010). Authoritarian democracy is therefore based on theoretical ground that gives preference to stability, unity and sovereignty over liberal rights and pluralism.

Consequently, the hybrid regime theory is applicable to Central African states where elections are conducted which are manipulated by the incumbency through executive dominance, poor judiciaries and dependency of resources, leading to grey-zone governance. According to democratic consolidation theory, poor institutionalization results in failure (low V-Dem scores (0.25 Liberal Democracy Index) and Freedom House scores below 25/100). The theory of liberal democracy emphasizes subversion: there is a multiparty system, but no judicial independence and civil rights, e.g. the domination of Paul Biya in Cameroon since 1982. The theory of extractive institutions renders

rentiers economies (oil, minerals) to elite capture, continuing a process of authoritarian resilience and underdevelopment.

Case study of selected countries

Cameroon is a classic example of a hybrid regime where formal democratic institutions are used alongside deeply rooted authoritarianism. Political authority, however, has been very centralized under the long-serving rule of Paul Biya since 1982, even after multiparty politics was restored in the early 1990s (Cheeseman, 2015). Even though elections are held on a regular basis, they are broadly criticized due to the irregularities in them, such as voter suppression, absence of transparency, and administrative bias (Freedom House, 2024). The electoral commission is not independent and the opposition parties have structural limitations which do not allow them to compete politically meaningfully. In addition, the judiciary, despite its constitutional independence, is commonly politicized by the executive; the freedom of media is limited by censorship and intimidation of journalists (Diamond, 2019). The dominance of the executive is also supported through the constitutional amendments that eliminated the presidential term limits and allowed the executive to extend its tenure. The use of security forces to quash dissent especially in the Anglophone regions and the civil society organizations are subject to strict rules. Accordingly, election is mostly an instrument of legitimacy and not accountability and this strengthens authoritarian resilience by patronage and state dominance of resources (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

Similarly, Gabon also represents a stable authoritarian democracy that is perpetuated by the rule of a dynasty and wealth of resources. The rule of Omar Bongo and then Ali Bongo Ondimba has been characterized by a continuity of elite rule throughout the decades (Yates, 2015). Although Gabon is officially a multiparty democracy, the electoral activities are usually influenced to benefit the ruling party and the transparency is poor and the participation of the opposition is restricted. The legislature, the judiciary, and the media are all weak and dependent on the executive and controlled by the government respectively. The rentier state system is based on the oil wealth of Gabon, which allows taking advantage of patronage politics and ensures the lack of accountability to citizens (Ross, 2012). Consequently, institutionalized democracy is kept to a minimum and opposition to politics is usually divided or compromised.

On the contrary, the Central African Republic (CAR) is a weak hybrid regime that is influenced by chronic instability, coups, and civil war (Mehler, 2011). Even though there are democratic systems like elections and constitutional governance, they are often compromised by insecurity and poor state capacity. Election procedures are not regular and the state is experiencing difficulty in the administration of the rule of law within its borders. In the times of crisis, the power is concentrated, and military participants are frequently involved, and civil liberties are highly restricted. CAR presents a picture of a hybrid form of governance that is fragile and conflict-ridden, unlike Cameroon and Gabon which are relatively stable in

terms of authoritarianism. In all three cases, there are still similar trends of electoral manipulation, executive control, poor institutions and limited civil liberties though with different degrees of intensity.

Empirical Analyses

The example of authoritarian democracy is the endurance, which is empirically illustrated by Cameroon, Gabon, and the Republic of Congo. These countries are involved in regular elections nevertheless have deep-seated power bases that coerce real opposition. The incumbents usually use the rhetoric of development and national security as a reason to control politics. As an example, the government of Cameroon, led by Biya, uses administrative and military apparatuses to suppress dissent and remains active in the formal democratic ceremonies (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). In Gabon, the ruling party and the domination of the election system allowed the autocratic democracy of the dynasty (Yates, 2015).

The continued existence of authoritarian democracy in Central Africa is also closely related to socio-economic and institutional circumstances. The economies of the region that are based on oil, timber, and minerals lead to the creation of a rentier state that, in turn, strengthens elite authority (Ross, 2012). Also, the reliance on the revenues of the natural resources spoils the fiscal transparency and social contract between the state and the citizens. Weak parliaments, politicized judiciaries and weak civil societies, institute-wide, do not support effective checks and balances. Freedom of the media is still curtailed, and leaders of the opposition tend to be

jailed or exiled. The security sector is also the key to maintaining authoritarian regimes, whereby the military and the paramilitary are deployed to rein in opposition and manage elections (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2012). Political militarization in the Central African Republic and Chad is a country where the distinction between the power of a state and coercive power is obfuscated.

Also, the international forces influence the survival of these regimes. France, China, and Russia are external actors that tend to disregard democratic rule in favour of stability and economic gains (Taylor, 2014). Security partnerships and development aid occasionally unwillingly strengthen other authoritarian leaders who present themselves as the providers of stability in the region and in the fight against terrorism (Engel, 2019). There is a mixed picture of the results of the empirical study of democracy in Central Africa. Quantitative indicators like Freedom House and the Economist Intelligence Unit are always able to place the Central African states at the lowest positions in terms of democracy in the world, as they have low scores on political rights and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2024). However, the region-specific empirical studies that discriminate between liberal and authoritarian types of democracy in this subregion are few. A big part of the African democratization literature is devoted to West and Southern Africa, where more varied democratic experiences are found (Cheeseman, 2015). As a result, the Central African region has not been the subject of comparative political study, given the special combination of democratic institutions and authoritarian stability.

The existing data points out that as the electoral turnout has been on the rise since the 1990s, the quality of elections, press freedom, and independence of the courts have not been improving by much (Resnick and van de Walle, 2013). Also, the public opinion data, including the Afrobarometer surveys, depict that there is a high disillusionment with democracy, as the citizens believe that elections cannot bring about accountability (Bratton, 2010). These results highlight the importance of further study that would allow for differentiating between the form and the content of democracy. Liberal and authoritarian democracy in Central Africa can be the focus of the study based on the theories of hybrid regimes and democratic consolidation. According to the hybrid regime theory, political systems may have hybrid features, which refute the old dichotomy of democracy and dictatorship (Diamond, 2002). These regimes use the institutions of democracy to stay in power, leading to grey-zone governance. In the meantime, the democratic consolidation theory focuses on institutionalization of democratic norms and practices as the key to the sustainability of democracy (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Using these frameworks enables scholars to evaluate to what extent the Central African states have travelled along the authoritarianism-liberal democracy spectrum, or the other way around.

In the empirical sense, these political systems can only be analysed using measurable indicators, like electoral competitiveness, civil liberties, separation of powers and media freedom. Comparative studies can also show whether these states are

progressing to liberal democracy or stabilising the authoritarian democracy. It has a political consequence concerning governance, development, and stability in the region. The political path of Central Africa has immense consequences on the peace of the region and the world governance. Constant authoritarianism is one of the factors leading to conflict, state fragility and humanitarian crisis as observed in the CAR and some of the regions in Chad. Ineffective governance also means that there is no economic diversification and sustainable development. In addition, authoritarian policies in the region have transnational impacts, such as transnational insurrections, refugee movements, and undermined regional integration activities, upheld by regional institutions, such as the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC).

Authoritarian democracies are also proving the assumptions of the liberal international order in a world where liberal democracy is supposed to be universal. The case of the Central African experience demonstrates that autocratic leaders can adopt a democratic system and institutions to acquire international legitimacy and deny the real democratization. This two-facet casts doubt on how successful external democracy promotion is, and how essential the locally-based governance changes can be (Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010).

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Authoritarian democracies are also proving the assumptions of the liberal international order in a world where liberal democracy is supposed to be universal. The case of the Central African experience demonstrates that autocratic leaders can adopt democratic terminology and institutions to acquire international legitimacy and deny the real democratization. This two-facet casts doubt on how successful external democracy promotion is, and how essential the locally-based governance changes can be (Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010).

Methodology

The research design adopted for the study is qualitative research design through descriptive and explanatory literature review. This method is suitable because the phenomenon under investigation, the coexistence of liberal and authoritarian democracy in Central Africa, requires no measurement but a profound, contextual, and historical examination. The study uses secondary sources such as journal articles, books, policy reports, and institutional documents to generate valid and relevant data. The study uses a comparative case study approach with a focus on the selected countries including Cameroon, Gabon, and the Central African Republic, which epitomize hybrid political regimes. The

thematic and descriptive methods were used to analyse the data and identify the concurrent patterns of electoral manipulation, weak institutions, and executive dominance. This structure provides greater depth of analysis, facilitates the triangulation of various sources as well as an excellent framework of comprehending the gap between the formal democratic formations and the real authoritarian nature of the region.

Discussion

The empirical data of democracy in the Central African region show that the authoritarian and hybrid regimes persist in the region, although the liberal democratic norms have been diffused globally since the early 1990s. The majority of Central African countries are deficient in political pluralism, civil liberties and media freedom (Freedom House, 2024; V-Dem, 2024 and Marshall et. al., 2023). The study revealed that in 2024, both Cameroon and Chad had a score below 25 out of 100 concerning the Freedom House Global Freedom Index, indicating deep-rooted autocratic dominion over long-term regimes. Likewise, Equatorial Guinea and Congo-Brazzaville are still characterized by the features of the personalist rule in which democratic institutions have minimal formal but substantial representation (Freedom House, 2024; V-Dem, 2024). The findings thus highlight a key paradox that the institutional structure of liberal democracies, like constitutions, electoral commissions and parliaments, exists in most countries, there is the tendency of such institutions to be subjected to executive domination. This case can be described as competitive authoritarianism, in which the formal

rules of democracy are present, yet they are exploited to perpetuate autocratic authority (Levitsky and Way, 2010).

The empirical evidence indicates that liberal democracy within Central Africa is still loosely institutionalized. In the region, the rule of law, judicial independence and electoral integrity are rated very low as compared to the global or continental averages. V-Dem (2024) states that most states in Central Africa have an average score of 0.25 on a 0-1 index of Liberal Democracy (LDI), as opposed to the sub-Saharan African mean of 0.42. This implies that election processes are conducted periodically, although they hardly lead to real leadership transition and policy responsibility.

As an example, the 2023 elections in Gabon, which followed centuries of Bongo rule, were not without issues, and the population lacked confidence in the government, which resulted in a military intervention breaking down the existing institutions (International IDEA, 2023). In the same fashion, the 2018 presidential election in Cameroon re-elected Paul Biya to office, although the outcomes were controversial and there were allegations of fraud and voter intimidation (Human Rights Watch, 2019). These instances demonstrate that despite formal electoral processes, incumbency sabotage, and interference in security and lack of opposition organization take place systematically.

This observational trend lends credence to the theoretical hypotheses of the concept of illiberal democracy by Fareed Zakaria (1997), in which governments conduct elections but deny basic rights and balances to the administration. Liberal democracy in

Central Africa is still limited by clientelism, elite patronage, and ethno-regional politics, which limit the independence of political institutions. It is also revealed that authoritarian democracy, which is a type of political system that is a blend of the electoral processes and autocratic ruling, is still the ruling regime throughout the region. In this mixed system, leaders cement their authority by holding regulated elections and constitutional referenda and at the same time having coercive influence over the judicial system, the press and the security agencies. Hence, authoritarian democracy in Central Africa is empirically related to various structural variables. The empirical evidence shows that the authoritarian leaders in Central Africa have perfected the science of electoral authoritarianism, where elections are used as instruments of legitimacy and not a tool of accountability. In this way, although the governments of the region have an illusion of democracy, their political structures are still executive-based and repressive in reality.

The study also indicate that the two elements of socio-economic underdevelopment and continued authoritarianism strongly correlate with each other. In the universal ranking, the central African region has the lowest Human Development Index (HDI), which led to incredibly low literacy levels, high poverty and limited access to national services. In addition, the World Bank (2024) has governance indicators, including Government Effectiveness and Control of Corruption, which place Central African countries at the bottom of the list, which means that the institutions are weak, and rent-seeking is widespread. As an example, in 2023,

Cameroon has a corruption control percentage rank of less than 20%, and Equatorial Guinea has a score of less than 10, which goes to show that patronage networks are the main drivers of regimes remaining stable at the cost of democratic consolidation. This works to the theory of extractive institutions suggested by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), according to which the political and economic structures that concentrate power in the hands of a small group of people prevent inclusive growth and democratic governance. The experience of Central Africa is hence an indication of a self-perpetuating cycle of dictatorial survival and economic depression.

The research evidence also proves that participation of the civil society is still limited in the authoritarian democracies in the Central Africa region. According to Freedom House (2024), the scores on civic space are low in the region and non-governmental organizations, journalists, and opposition parties are limited. But the emergence of digital activism and social media has brought in new, though weak, sources of civic participation. The Internet has become a platform to engage in political discussions and organizing, particularly when it comes to younger groups of people who are disappointed in the existing system of parties (Nlandu, 2022). Notwithstanding this, the governments often use cyber-surveillance, internet blackouts, and fake news to suppress digital dissent. This paradox highlights the fact that, despite the enlargement of participation by technological tools, authoritarian states evolve by means of digital authoritarianism.

The empirical analyses indicate that local and global processes reinforce the

authoritarian mentality even more. The Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) has not been much effective in ensuring democratic norms as compared to ECOWAS or SADC. Its principle of non-interference enables member states to continue with internal repression without much diplomatic ramifications (Murison, 2021). Also, foreign powers like France, China, and Russia have strategic interests in Central African governments, and their interests are based on security and resource acquisition rather than democracy reforms (Carbone, 2020). This geopolitical fact illustrates that there is a certain lack of external influence to democratize, because the foreign partners are inclined to appreciate the regime stability rather than change it to liberalism. This external assistance is the reason why authoritarian democracies survive even in cases of bad governance and legitimacy crises.

The empirical experience of Central Africa supports the theoretical claim that democratization is not linear. The collaboration of electoral practices and authoritarian control refutes the liberal and authoritarian dichotomy of democracy. The results validate the model of competitive authoritarianism by Levitsky and Way (2010) and the idea of democratic recession introduced by Diamond (2019), as both theories focus on how modern forms of authoritarianism use the symbols of legitimate democracy. In addition to this, the conclusions may indicate that liberal democracy needs more than elections, and it needs the rule of law, accountability and an active civil society. The evidence supplied by O'Donnell (1994) proves his differentiation between formal and

delegative democracy, according to which the leaders purport to represent the people], yet they do not act restrained by the institutions. This style of delegation is mostly applicable to the regimes of the Central African region, where power is centralised and institutions are used as a tool of elite control, instead of democratic checks and balances.

Although the authoritarian rule remains strong, the statistics also show new democratic undertones. There are examples of peaceful political dialogue in the Central African Republic, civil protests in Gabon and Cameroon, and what can be called digital activism on a youth level, which indicates a gradual yet noticeable shift towards responsibility and political awareness (International IDEA, 2023). Moreover, more and more young populations are growing weary of established elites because of the growing pressure on electoral transparency and term limits. But unless there are institutional changes to enhance electoral commissions, judiciary independence and mechanisms to curb corruption, these democratic impulses may be trampled down or they may be bought off. Therefore, although the empirical evidence is an indication of possible openings, the territory is still within the cycle of authoritarian adjustments instead of changes.

Conclusion

The study of liberal and authoritarian democracies in the Central African region shows a complicated and problematic political situation. Although most nations have formal democratic institutions like constitutions, electoral commissions, and legislatures, the truth of the matter

lies in the fact that hybrid regimes, whereby authoritarian practices prevail, dominate. The area is typified by a lack of institutional autonomy, electoral fraud, suppression of dissent, and little civil freedom, which essentially are the sources of non-true democracy in governance. The continuity of the authoritarian democracy where elections are used to legitimize long-time rulers and not to hold them accountable is associated with the need for diverse structural and socio-economic reasons. Central African regions consist of a colonial heritage of centralized rule, dependency on resources that breed rentier states, political militarization and weak state institutions. Additionally, the small size of the civil society, suppressed media freedom, and external geopolitical interests give more weight to the stability of the regime rather than to the democratic changes. These aspects have instilled a system whereby dictatorial leadership goes hand in hand with the rhetoric and semblance of democracy, which cannot consolidate democracy and thus lead to the recurrence of instability, war, and underdevelopment. However, under this authoritarian rule, there are emerging democratic stirrings such as civil unrest, political debate, and youth activism through social media, which augur well for the possibilities of more responsible government. But unless there are more substantive institutional changes and beefed-up democratic protection, these impulses are weak and subject to authoritarian retrenchment. This paper, therefore, reiterates the fact that the process of democratization in central Africa is not linear or unavoidable but rather depends on the conscious structural changes in

governance, political culture, as well as the dynamics of external assistance.

Recommendations

The realisation of these recommendations needs a collective action by the governments of the countries, the regional organisations, the civil societies, and the international partners. This is necessary so that democratic governance, stability and sustainable development in Central Africa are promoted.

Electoral Reforms and Strengthening of Institutions

The cure has to be aimed towards strengthening the autonomy and the ability of the electoral commissions, judiciaries, and legislatures to have free, fair and credible elections. The electoral laws would be rewritten to remove the systems that would allow the incumbents to manipulate the process, and the systems of transparent electoral monitoring would be reinforced.

Judicial Promotion of Independence and Rule of Law

Political influences in judicial systems should be mitigated by legal safeguards and institutional changes. The constitutionally vital role of an independent judiciary is to support constitutionalism, defend civil liberties and hold the government accountable.

Civil Society and Media Freedom Empowerment

The independent media and civil society organizations are vital in demanding accountability by governments and promoting political participation. The policies must secure

civic space, ease the operations of non-governmental organisations, and secure the freedom of the press and expression, including the online space.

Inclusive Government and Political Pluralism

The governments are advised to encourage inclusive political systems with consideration of minority rights, less clientelism, and true opposition. The decentralization of government and promotion of local governmental autonomy can enhance democratic responsiveness.

Meeting Socio-Economic Authoritarianism Drivers

Elite capture can be reduced by diversifying the economy to reduce reliance on resource rents and enhancing the transparency in governance practices. Long-term democratization will be supported by development policies that improve human development and minimize poverty.

Enhancing Regional Collaborations and Foreign Support

The regional bodies like the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) ought to take more active positions in ensuring that democratic norms are promoted and intervene in instances of democratic backsliding. The partnership of aid and security cooperation by the international partners requires that they are pegged on the understandable democratic requirements whereby democratic reforms are more important than just stability.

Democratic Culture and Political Education

Civic education, and in particular among young people and the marginalized is a crucial program that should be employed to instil democratic principles and heighten political awareness. It is also essential to harness the digital platforms to engage in politics and safeguard the digital authoritarianism.

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