

Democracy Promotion From International Perspective: An Assessment Of International Election Observation In Africa

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ABSTRACT

International election observation (IEO) has become the most visible and highly celebrated tool for democracy promotion especially, in emerging democracies of Africa, due to controversial nature of election and low level of impartiality tradition in those climes. However, it is pertinent to ask whether international election observation has actually promoted democracy in Africa or not? This study contend that, placing too much emphasis on election observation and given inadequate attention to other means of promoting democracy by the global West is misleading: given that democracy can rarely survive in a society where there is significance worrisome of an expanding

economic and materials divide within and among people to the extent that some are grossly poor that their voices, votes and lives does not count, while few are grossly rich to be able to buy both votes and lives of the poor. The aim of this study is to examine whether IEO is a viable tool for promoting democracy in Africa and other developing countries, and to investigate the continued relevance of IEO given its criticism of politicization and selective justice.

Keywords: Democracy, democracy promotion, election, international election observation

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Democracy promotion in the contemporary politics has been tremendously enhanced by globalization pressure as a result of unprecedented level of integration and interdependence among nation states through the spread of ideas and sharing of economic, political and technology advance.¹ Similarly, the growing economic interdependence among countries in the global village” made states vulnerable to outside influences that involve political and economic pressures to democratize.² Thus, the establishment of international institutions or organizations is considered as probably the most effective response to globalization pressure. Given the significant impacts of globalization and democratization waves in the 1990s, promotion of democracy by means of international election observation has been part of effective response to the overbearing influence of globalization on democracy in Africa, this is based on the assumption that where governments are legitimized through genuine democratic elections, the scope for non-democratic challenges to power is likely to reduce.

To this extent, Odukoya (2007) observed that, election observation has become a part of the global project to promote democracy in Africa and other parts of the developing world.³ This assertion was supported by Bjornlund (2004) that, one of the best known and potentially consequential forms of democracy promotion is international election monitoring.⁴ United Nations further affirmed that international election observation expresses the interest of the international community in the achievement of democratic elections, as

part of democratic development.⁵ For instance, during the 1990s, international democracy promotion grew into a booming industry, and spent directly on democracy promotion activities (not including indirect activities like aid conditionality) represented more than \$500 million annually in the US alone (Carothers 1999).⁶ This was further buttressed by Strohal (2008) that, election observation is the best-established, most visible and often best funded type of democracy related assistance.⁷

However, given the primordial nature of politics and poor economic situation in most of the African countries, the overrated roles of international election observation as the core instruments for promoting democracy in Africa has produce inconsequential result. Not surprisingly, despite huge funds often allocated and excessive attention usually given to international election observation by international donors and democracy promoters, Africa has continued to remain a graveyard of democratic election. This study submit that any attempt by democracy promoters to strengthen democracy in Africa must encompass genuine encouragement of economic development, military assistance to counter terrorism and other insurgency groups, poverty reduction, assistance in public service and administrative reform and adequate support for social justice.

For clarity and analytical discourse, the study is subdivided into five sections: introduction, conceptual clarification, democracy promotion and international election observation in Africa, conclusion and recommendations.

2.0 CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION

2.1 Democracy

The lack of a generally accepted view on democracy is evident in multilateral organizations such as 'Freedom House' and the 'Community of Democracies'. The Freedom House supports freedom worldwide: rating countries level of freedom rather than defining or measuring democracy. Freedom House rate countries as free, partly free, or not free via numerical assessment of a country's political rights and civil liberties. On the other hand, the Community of Democracies consists of over 100 nations does not define democracy but does establish a list of requirements that countries must meet to become members. (see requirements for the Community of Democracies).

Whitehead (2002) pointed out that, definition of democracy varied over-time, and among culture: with even subtle differences in British and American understandings of key elements of democracy, he argues that "other boundaries" of the concept of democracy are to a significant extent malleable and negotiable. Although he observed that democracy has some indispensable components, without which the concept would be vacuous, nevertheless these indispensable elements are skeletal and can in any case be arranged in various possible configurations. He further notes that, the meaning of democracy is likely to remain contested and even to some extent unstable as current processes of democratization unfold.⁸

According to Toyo (1994) democracy implies acceptance of the basic

equality of men as human and basic responsibility of all adult men and women for their own destiny. He further maintain that there cannot be a genuine democracy in a country where citizen are grossly unequal in wealth and the poor who are inevitably the majority are dependent on the wealthy.⁹ Meanwhile, Lewis (1965) posited that, democracy implies that all who are affected by a decision should have the chance to participate in making that decision either directly or through chose a representative. He concluded that if only the winning parties makes all the governmental decisions and that the losers only criticized but not govern, then democracy is meaningless.¹⁰ Because, to exclude the losing groups or parties from participation in decision making clearly violate the primary meaning of democracy.

2.2 Democracy promotion

Democracy promotion in the contemporary politics has been tremendously enhanced by globalization pressure as a result of unprecedented level of integration and interdependence among nation states through the spread of ideas and sharing of economic, political and technology advance.¹¹ While the rapid growing of economic interdependence among countries has also made states vulnerable to external intervention through political and economic pressures for developing countries to democratize.

Consequently, the European Union approaches to democracy promotion in its external relations encompass the full range of foreign relations and development cooperation activities which contribute to the development and consolidation of democracy in third world countries, this

implies “all measures designed to facilitate democratic development” (The European Council of Ministers 2006:3).¹² According to Ayoade, (1999) democracy promotion through international election monitoring and observation especially by the West or developed democracy is a means of guaranteeing the integrity of an election process in an atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety about the integrity of election results where the institutional framework for the election is a subject of controversy.¹³

There are other motivations behind democracy promotion other than advancement of democratic values which ranges from advancing economic, political and national interests. However, where democracy values is truly given priority, the promoters tends to invest both human and material resources in economic cooperation and development, military assistance, poverty reduction, administrative reform and strengthen government institutions to fight against corruption which would provide a more leverage context for genuine democratisation,

2.3 International election observation

The *UN Declaration of Principles and Code of Conduct for International Election Observation* (2005) offers the most comprehensive and first ever universal definition of international election observation in the following terms the systematic, comprehensive and accurate gathering of information concerning the laws, processes and institutions related to the conduct of elections and other factors concerning the overall electoral

environment; the impartial and professional analysis of such information; and the drawing of conclusions about the character of electoral processes based on the highest standards for accuracy of information and impartiality analysis.¹⁴ According to Guidelines for Election Observation: Domestic and International Observers. (INEC, 2007) international election observation is conducted by intergovernmental and international non-governmental organizations and associations in order to provide an impartial and accurate assessment of the nature of election processes for the benefit of the population of the country where the election is held and for the benefit of the international community.¹⁵

According to Michael Reisman (1992), the term “international election observation” has come to mean the contemporaneous examination and appraisal of key phases of a particular type of national or sub-national decision making process. That process maybe called an election, a plebiscite or a referendum.¹⁶ In the same vein, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) (1999), stressed that election observation refers to the purposeful gathering of information regarding an electoral process, and the making of informed judgment on the conduct of such a process on the basis of the information collected by persons who are not inherently authorized to intervene in the process, and whose involvement in the mediation or technical assistance activities should not be such as to jeopardize their main observation responsibilities.¹⁷ Although the term ‘monitoring’ and ‘observation’ are often

used interchangeably, it is worth noting that the two processes are in fact fairly distinct, albeit intertwined: Election observation refers to information gathering or on site fact finding and making of an informed judgment about the credibility, legitimacy and transparency of the electoral process. Election observation is often carried out by agencies that cannot intervene in any material way in the voting and counting operations.¹⁸ In the same vein, the Electoral Institute of Southern Africa EISA (2003) defines, election observation as fact finding by both internal and external actors regarding an electoral process with limited or without direct intervention into the actual electoral process.¹⁹ According to McCoy (1995), election observation belongs to a set of development policy initiatives thought to facilitate good governance and democratic institutions in states struggling with democracy... in its infancy, election observation scope was limited as it was centered on gauging whether or not an election was conducted in a free and fair manner.²⁰

In the same manner, EISA (2003), defines election observation as information gathering or on-site fact-finding and making an informed judgment about the credibility, legitimacy and transparency of the electoral process, which is often carried out by external agencies that cannot intervene in any material way in the voting and counting operations.¹⁷²¹ The United Nations has also demonstrated that, achieving genuine democratic elections therefore has become a matter of concern for international organizations; because the right of citizens to vote and be elected at period genuine democratic elections are

internationally recognized human rights.²² Thus international election monitoring which focuses on civil and political right is part of international human rights monitoring.²³

3.0 DEMOCRACY PROMOTION AND INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVATION IN AFRICA

Specifically, global pressures for countries to hold democratic elections have changed the incentives for incumbent leaders outside of the developed democratic world particularly in Africa to invite international election observers. As rightly observed by Hyde (2011), negative reports from monitors have been linked to domestic uprising and electoral revolutions, reductions in foreign aid, exclusion from international forums, and other forms of internationally imposed sanctions.²⁴

Generally speaking, democracy promotion idea is now under close scrutiny among nations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), experts and scholars. One of the most significant factors that generated this scrutiny according to Epstein *et al* is the lack of clear definition of democracy which has hampered the formulation of democracy promotion policy and effective prioritizing of democracy promotion activities over the years.²⁵ Apart from lack of clear definition of democracy, the question of what criteria will determine when a country has attained an acceptable level of democratic reform and no longer needs democracy assistance?²⁶

The lack of clear definition of democracy which hampered the formulation of democracy promotion policy and effective prioritizing of democracy promotion activities have manifested in European Union (EU) democracy promotion in Nigeria. According to Khakee (2007), European democracy promotion in Nigeria do not lie primarily at programme level, instead, they are found in the wider relationship between Nigeria and the EU in which issue other than democracy are paramount. Not surprisingly energy-as well as, to a lesser extent, Nigeria's regional great power status and its fragile internal balance have made EU leaders quite timid in their defense of democratic value in Nigeria: thus for instance, after the scathing EU criticism of elections, EU states quickly returned to business as usual.²⁷

Contestation over democracy promotion has led to the question: why promoting democracy in Africa, and for what purpose(s)? This question becomes imperative since election observation has become the most visible initiative of the Global West's activities in promoting democracy in developing world. To Epstein *et al* (2007), many experts believe that extending democracy can reduce terrorism, while encouraging global political stability and economic prosperity.²⁸ According to Bush in his National Strategic for Combating Terrorism, cites democracy promotion as a long-term solution for winning war on Terror.²⁹ In the same vein, Clinton in his National Security Strategy of Engagements and Enlargement argues that, democracies create free markets that offer economic opportunity, make for more reliable

trading partners, and are far less likely to wage war on one another.³⁰

However, democracy promotion by means of election monitoring and observation were severely criticized by Barya (1993). According to him, election monitoring does not necessarily mean that the West is interested in promoting democracy in Africa. To him, election monitoring is actually meant to serve the following three purposes; (a) to crush once and for all the ideology of socialism and to replace it unambiguously with the ideology of free enterprise worldwide, (b) to create a new credible source of legitimacy for hegemony and thereby ensure leverage over specific countries which are considered economically and politically useful to the west or specific Western countries and (c) to justify the impending decline in Africa's share of global assistance as resources flows to Eastern Europe begins to mount.³¹

Similarly, Bjornlund *et al* (1992) pointed out the weakness of democracy promotion through election observation that, observers also have the desire to project and protect the institutional agenda of their organizations, and there is the tendency to comply with hegemonic position and interests of their countries defined in terms of strategic and economic interests, with human rights and democracy being tangential.³² The same opinion was also expressed by Carter Center (March, 2006) that, if the organization or nation responsible for administering democracy assistance is motivated by institutional or strategic pressures or interests, meaningful democracy promotion may become subverted by institutional requirements

and democratization may not ensue.³³ In practical terms, this suggests that whether democratic assistance in form of election monitoring and observation will produce positive or negative results depends largely on the motives of democracy promoters. Therefore, it does not necessarily mean that promoters of democracy will automatically be motivated by institutional or strategic interests.

However, Bjornlund (2004) was conscious enough to conclude that election monitoring also boost confidence in the fairness of the electoral process; helps deter fraud in the balloting and counting procedures; reports on the integrity of the election; mediates disputes resulting from the election, and vouch safes democratization.³⁴ Therefore, the positions of both Bjornlund and Carter Centre on democracy promotion were in consonance that although international election observation has helped to improved elections in many developing countries, it is not a panacea device: flaw or even fraudulent elections can still occur. By implication, it could be posited that democracy promotion by means of election monitoring and observation is capable of producing both negative and positive results. However, the central weakness of Barya's argument in relation to Africa is that, it failed to compare the outcome of elections when observers and monitors were present to the counterfactual world in which observers and monitors were not present, before concluding that democracy promotion through election monitoring and observation mechanism are self serving tools aimed at promoting the interest of the West or developed democracies.

Given the foregoing, it is pertinent to investigate the continued relevance of international election observation as a viable tool for promoting democracy in Africa despite its criticism of politicization and selective justice. It is instructive to note that, the emergence of international election observation particularly in the political scene of Africa and other developing countries was graced with diverse reactions by the government, election stakeholders and electorates: some argued that election observation is an indirect way of West intervention in the political affairs of their former colonies; in the same vein, some viewed it as a second attempt at re-colonization of Africa; to some others it is a calculative attempt to exploit Africa and foster economic and strategic interests of the global West, while some sections of the African society sees it as a welcome development for electoral scrutiny and democratic development.

To Hyde and Marinov (2007) beginning in the late 1980s, many incumbent regimes in Africa and other developing countries faced what Huntington calls an 'insoluble dilemma' in trying to comply with international expectations without necessarily conceding defeat: in sum, not only that democracy promotion increase the pressure to hold clean elections in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the consequences for stealing elections also changed, because international monitors became available and international donors and democracy promoters began to link credible elections to a variety of international benefits.³⁵ However, as widely argued, this development represents an overt attempt by

international actors to influence the course of domestic politics, yet it is not clear whether democracy promotion by means of international election observation has actually influenced domestic politics positively in most cases, or whether this type of democracy promotion will be given priority by Western donors in a country that is not economically and strategically important to the West or developed democracies, given the high cost of promoting democracy.

Importantly, democracy promotion especially through election monitoring and observation by both bilateral and multilateral agencies and foreign governments has been viewed by many incumbents in Africa as having the same purpose with the political pluralism and structural adjustment of the 80s and early 90s which was meant to be applied as 'carrot'-and-'stick' pressure on developing countries in order for the West to achieve their strategic interests.

Based on the foregoing explication, democracy promotion via international election observation in Africa has become politicized in some aspects and in many countries that is deemed to be of strategic and economic importance to the selective countries of the Global West. For instance, it was discovered that the attitudes and reports of international election observers were less sympathetic in the 2003 and 2007 general elections in Nigeria where their sponsors were not strategically involved, than in the 1999 elections which were partially facilitated by sponsors of democracy promotion (Badmus, 2016).³⁶

Similarly, in countries like Iraq during Saddam Hussein regime, Libya during Muhammed Gaddafi regime, in

Syria and Afghanistan democracy promotion has resulted in human rights violation against many innocent citizens in those countries: human rights violation such as restrictions on freedom of citizens, sometimes loss of lives and properties; and more notably hamper economic opportunities, especially if democracy promotion is militarily imposed on a country as opposed to the country itself taking the initiatives.

In the same analogy, Epstein et al also observed that, imposition of democracy through military intervention, with the ultimate goal of imposing a new democratic system, is, if possible, even more problematic: Regime change through military force has worked in some cases, such as Grenada in 1993 and Panama in 1989, where the goal was to restore a pre-existing constitutional order.³⁷ The United States' recent military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq to oust existing despotic regimes, according to CRS the goal of building democracy initially was secondary, but later became primary. The difficulties of establishing democracy in those cases is reminiscent of other cases of military intervention by the United States in other countries; such as Somalia, Lebanon and Vietnam, where questions were raised as to whether the cultural or institutional basis for democracy exists, and whether such conditions could be fostered through intervention?³⁸

It has also been observed that in many Africa and other developing countries like Liberia, Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo and Egypt, cynical promotion of democracy has constituted a destabilizing factor in a country as well as its region, and other

instances where democracy promotion has produced a backlash were also documented which includes restrictions on freedom, wide spread hunger and disease, economy recession and civil unrest in some countries where democracy promotion have taken place.

Thus, democracy promotion especially from US has come under heavy attack as Epstein *et al* (2007) rightly observed that, some viewed democracy program as inappropriate interfering in the domestic politics of foreign countries, often producing a backlash. For instance, the recent backlash against democratic reform in Russia, election of anti-American government in the Palestinian Territories, and the rise to elected office of Hezbollah in Lebanon have caused some to question the value of US democracy promotion investments.³⁹ Against the backdrop of “democracy peace theory”, as asserted by many proponents of democracy promotion, Gowa (1999) contends that, this theory has more to do with alignment of interests and the bipolar balance in the world after World War II than democracy/peace characteristics that many today claim exist. She argues further that democratic peace is a Cold War phenomenon, that is, the available data show that democratic peace is limited to the years between 1946 and 1980. She posited that, there are non-democracies that do not war with each other and may be able to constrain their leaders from embarking on military actions abroad about as effectively as democracies.⁴⁰

Gowa’s argument is limited in the sense that, evidence has shown that even after the collapse of Berlin Wall (fall of Soviet Union) and subsequently end of

Cold War, and emergence of new world order through Unipolar World System, the world is yet to witness either major or minor world war between one democracy and another. Put differently, the establishment of democracy as global norms has blocked the possibility of waging physical war among democratically constituted governments. Secondly, her argument that there are non-democracies that do not wage war with each other is also weak, simply because, it is not in the character of non-democratic states not to wage war if possible, but the contemporary world politics which has given priority to advancement of democracy worldwide, has also increased the risk for non-democracies contemplating waging war against another country. For instance in 1991, collective action was taken against Saddam Hussein during Iraq’s invasion of Sovereign state of Kuwait through the UN’s Security Council’s Collective actions.

Despite the successes of democracy promotion, it has however proved to be a highly uncertain venture. As Hadenius and Teorell (2007) rightly observed that, only 23% of transition from authoritarian governments over the three decades from 1972 to 2003 resulted in democratic governments, while the great majority 77% resulted in another form of authoritarian regime or “pseudo-democratic government”.⁴¹ To some extent, Hadenius’ and Theorell’s arguments are valid, especially when we analyze the political situations in most of the African countries, particularly, Nigeria, where each process of transition from authoritarian regime to democratic rule before 1999 which were intensely struggled for by the political

class, were equally muddled up by the same class for personal aggrandizement, because majority of the political class in Nigeria are apparently interested in a democracy but only to the extent that it allows for their exploitative, self serving, corruption and anti-social behaviours.

4.0 CONCLUSION

Excessive priority given to international election observation at the neglect of other means of promoting democracy in Africa by the developed democracies from the global West is becoming worrisome, simply, because free and fair election alone does not automatically result in good governance and democratic consolidation. In most cases, in as much as democracy promotion through international election observation can guarantee free and fair election to some reasonable extent, the West sometimes become less concern about the real content of democracy in Africa. However, it is instructive to note that international observers cannot force profoundly polarized political factions to cooperate with one another, neither can they encourage power-sharing in a winner take-all presidential system, where competition for power is a zero-sum game and state power is concentrated, unchecked and provide easy access to economic power as well (Carothers, 1997).⁴² Thus, international observers cannot prevent the anti-democratic instincts of incumbents' intent on holding on to power at all cost and cannot prevalent wide spread of corruption which stands as major obstacle to free and fair election and democracy promotion at large in African countries.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Free and fair election alone does not necessarily make up for consolidated democracy and good governance. Therefore, the Western style of democracy promotion must be re-directed toward bridging the gap between extremely poor majority and extremely rich few in Africa: by discouraging and exposing corruption, unjustified foreign investments in forms of cash, properties and businesses in Western metropolitans either by past or present political office holders and other suspicious business operators from Africa. Lastly, for democracy to be fully entrenched and consolidated in Africa, democracy promoters must be willing to back up their words with actions: that any incumbents caught to have manipulated election should be made to serve certain punishment such as; isolation from international fora, severity in trade relations and democracy promoters must practically demonstrate their support for the oppositions in such situations.

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