

«IN THE NAME OF THE PEOPLE»**DEMOCRACY IN CRISIS – A LOOK AT THE AFRICAN CONTINENT**Armin Osmanovic¹

Democracy is retreating in many parts of the world. In societies shattered by economic crisis and rising inequality new, authoritarian populists find the declassified people that they need to restrict or even get rid of democracy in the name of “national renewal” – make America great again. Then what does the future hold for democracy in African countries?

The wave of democratisation of the 1990s did not only sweep across many formerly communist states, but also across some sub-Saharan African states. In Cameroon the people took to the streets and attained a multi-party system in 1992. The same happened in Togo where at the beginning of the 1990s government and opposition jointly passed a new democratic constitution. In South Africa the wind of change put an end to the racist apartheid regime. In 1994 all South Africans elected Nelson Mandela to become their new president. First free elections were also held in 1994 in Mozambique that had been caught in a bloody civil war between FRELIMO and RENAMO² since 1975. In Ethiopia change occurred in 1995. The communists with Mengistu³ at their helm had governed from 1977 to 1991 and had killed many hundreds of thousands in the Ethiopian «Red Terror». And eventually the long-term dictator Mobutu Sese Seko had to cede power in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997.

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² FRELIMO led the independence war against the Portuguese colonial regime. Mozambique gained independence in 1975. Only two years later RENAMO started fighting the FRELIMO government. The rebels were supported by the South African apartheid regime, the racist government of Rhodesia at the time (now Zimbabwe) and the USA. The civil war continued until 1992.

³ Haile Mariam Mengistu governed Ethiopia from 1977 to 1991. With the help of other militaries he had overthrown the Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and had consequently established a military regime (DERG) with himself at the helm. In 2006 Mengistu was sentenced, in absentia, for genocide as a result of the crimes of the so-called “Red Terror” when “class enemies” were killed.

In spite of his abhorrent human rights violations the West had supported him since his coup in 1965 as bulwark against communism.

The democratisation process in sub-Saharan African states, however, quickly ran into trouble. In Togo Etienne Gnassingbé Eyadéma⁴ retained power through violence and torture until his death in 2005 in spite of democratisation attempts by the opposition. His son still rules the country to this day. In Cameroon Paul Biya holds the rule since 1982. In 2008 he amended the constitution in order to be able to retain power. At the time, the opposition referred to this as a «constitutional coup d'état». In the DRC, Joseph Kabila who inherited the office from his father Laurent Kabila who was murdered in 2001 has occupied the presidential chair ever since. In spite of massive protests by the opposition he wants to amend the constitution and stand as a candidate for a third time and thus postponed the elections that had been planned for the end of 2016 by one year. After the democratic transition in 1995 in Ethiopia a state party (*Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front*) established itself, not wanting to part with power and in the process not hesitating to resort to violence and repression. And in South Africa President Jacob Zuma breaks the law, attacks the office of the public protector⁵– who uncovered the abuse of state funds for the construction of the president's private house – and continues to remain in office.

The retreat of democracy on the African continent fits the current picture where authoritarian neo-nationalist in Europe, in the USA and elsewhere attack and change democratic societies. In spite of all differences – especially with regard to weak states in Africa the relationship of which with society is different in the sense that they act as Gatekeeper States (Cooper 2002) who concentrate on the exploitation of the flow of resources and not on exercising more comprehensive control of society – reflecting on the crisis of democracy in African states can contribute to a deeper understanding of the worldwide expansion of authoritarianism and neo-nationalism. Worldwide democracies are under threat as they last were in the 1920s and 1930s when in Italy, Spain, Portugal, Poland, Hungary and Germany authoritarian, fascist and national-socialistic movements abolished democracies.

DISAPPOINTED HOPE

Democratisation of the 1990s was not only meant to bring about freedom, but also economic and social progress for the African countries because the decade before was characterised by

⁴ Eyadéma ruled the small West African country and former colony of the German Empire after a military coup in 1967. Eyadéma maintained close ties with France that administrated the country as a colony after World War I. More than any other African statesman he symbolised the close ties of many African heads of state with the political elite and businesspeople of France.

⁵ The role of the *public protector* in South Africa corresponds to that of the Auditor-General in Germany.

a deep economic crisis that caused it to be seen as a «lost decade» on the African continent. Similar to the awakening of Africa after the end of colonialism in most African states in the 1950s and 1960s, the hope of democratisation in the 1990s was linked to the hope for a better life. Claude Ake, the Nigerian thinker thus spoke of the need of a second liberation of Africa and in South Africa, Nelson Mandela in 1994 promised no less than «a better life for all».

The rise of democracy in the 1990s, however, only rarely fulfilled these hopes for a better life. In South Africa the new democratic government succeeded in establishing a black middle class. Yet the masses of black South Africans remained poor. The race society of the Cape turned into a class society where many people still feel unwanted. The opportunities in the life of an individual are determined – as Robert Putnam (2016) shows in his study *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis* for the USA – in South Africa, as in many other African states, by the family with its financial resources and their social capital, their network of important contacts.

The lack of opportunities has established itself in African countries in the past years. Social mobility is low. Emigration is often seen as the only escape. The privatisation of opportunities in life through the deterioration of schools and universities, also caused by the austerity programmes imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, contributes to the lives of the children of poor and rich families to drift apart rapidly. The economic upswing of African states since the beginning of the 2000s thus also only benefits a minority.

SCAPEGOATS IN POLITICS

Social disintegration weakened democracy on the African continent. This is the case in South Africa, where democracy established itself in 1994, as well as in Senegal, where in the years 2000 and 2012 democratic change occurred as a result of people taking to the streets. Elections seem to have hardly any or no effect on personal life, politicians and stakeholders in governments and companies seem not to care about the wishes of the population. Disappointed voters in African countries hardly differ from those in Europe or the USA who feel “redundant”.

In sub-Saharan countries most democratisation movements failed because of the elites that survived the storm and stress of protesters in the 1990s by resorting to violence, by incarcerating, torturing or expelling opponents from the country, but especially by using their money and influence and by teaming up with that part of the masses for which they care, which they keep loyal through promises and by declaring certain population groups as scapegoats.

In South Africa today people from other African countries are declared scapegoats for social misery. In 2015 – as also in 2008, when over 60 migrants were killed in xenophobic attacks in South Africa – foreigners were attacked. Shops were burnt down, people fled, especially many Mozambicans, who had sought a better life for themselves and their families in South Africa. The fire was fuelled by the Zulu King Zwelithini who referred to migrants as “lice and ants” and showed understanding for xenophobic violence (Osmanovic 2015b). In February this year violent attacks on people from other African countries again occurred in South Africa (Zeit Online 2017).

In Ivory Coast the migrants from the North were declared scapegoats for the social crisis at the end of the 1990s. This also applied to the candidate of the time and present President Alasane Ouattara who was declared to be no true Ivorian by his opponent Laurent Gbagbo. Ivorianism (Ivorité), the degree of “national purity”, became a criterion for access to state aid and work as well as to democratic rights. This, too, has its own history. Before independence the mixed societies in West Africa experienced pogroms against people from other African regions, when the newly established state structures, the regional administrative units, who later became the nation-states of today, gained power during the decolonisation process which resulted in competition for access to these authorities and their services. In this competition, nationality became a criterion (Cooper 2014: 352 f.).

The same is threatening to happen in France today, where a full or mere 21 percent of the people surveyed wanted to give preference to French citizens in their search for work, as the right-extremist presidential candidate Marine Le Pen, who run her presidential candidacy under the slogan “*Au nom du peuple*” (*In the name of the people*), had suggested (Le Monde, 8.3.2017). 33,9 percent or 11 Million voted for the neo-nationalist candidate.

In South Africa, such preferential treatment of workers with South African citizenship has already been a reality in labour law for the past years so that companies saw themselves forced to dismiss migrants when their residence permits expired, because these are in many cases not renewed so that they are often forced to leave the country with their families or to move into illegality.

Over the past years international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become scapegoats of a new type in African countries, as elsewhere too. Sometimes the work of NGOs is indeed problematic if they assume the role of the state, as has happened in Mali, and thereby help undermine statehood (Mann 2014), albeit not intentionally or neglect the political and cultural context, where they operate. The international troublemakers are unloved by

many rulers. International NGOs, for example support civil society in its battle against contracts of international mining multinationals with African governments, since these often serve to support the continued exploitation of African resources and people, or prompt scientists and the media to demand their democratic rights. These organisations in African countries often suffer the same fate as the Open Society Foundations⁶ of the financial juggler George Soros, who ended up in the crossfire of the mighty when his societies made many enemies, especially among the authoritarian governments of Hungary and Poland as well as in the Balkan states.

Generally the battle against the NGOs in African countries is silent. Governments strive to develop new laws that hinder the work of international organisations or that make such work impossible – as in Ethiopia, where the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung had to give up its office. On rare occasions methods of open intimidation are used, as the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung experienced in Egypt. In an attempt to get rid of the irritating controllers international NGOs are often referred to as foreign institutions with hostile interests or even as agents from abroad. In the case of George Soros, a US American of Hungarian-Jewish descent, anti-Semitism is used as a further weapon to discredit the work of the foundation funded by him and of its many partners in European and African states.

POLITICS AND THE MOB

A multitude of examples exists for the lack of democratic principles in the politics of many African states: the South African President Zuma and his government disrespected a penalty order by a South African court. Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir who is prosecuted by the International Court of Justice for crimes against humanity in his country should have been arrested in Johannesburg where he had travelled for a summit of the African Union in June 2015. But Zuma's government assisted him in leaving the country before the police could lay their hands on him (Osmanovic 2015a). In the Democratic Republic of Congo President Joseph Kabila does not take the constitution all too literally. It foresees a maximum of two periods of office for the president. But he wants to continue, instigates unrest and simply delays the presidential elections. African elites, in their disrespect of democracy and law, do not differ from the politics of Poland, Hungary or the USA.

Politics, in their measures against certain organisations and groups, be it international NGOs or migrants, always need the support of the mob, as Hannah Arendt called the insecure, socially

⁶ Open Society Foundations were established by Soros in 1993. The foundation also has offices in Africa, as for example in Dakar (OSIWA) and in Johannesburg (OSISA).

disintegrated people from all walks of life and social classes. They will follow this strong man, who assumes being the voice of the people – or as Marine Le Pen is saying “In the name of the people”! Even moderate politicians often follow these movements because they think that the rowdy mob is identical with the people (Arendt 2016: 246 ff.). Authoritarian populists – whether in opposition or in power – pretend to be executing the will of the people and indeed rely on that part of the population that is tired of democracy, the very often slow pace of negotiations (Thumfart 2017).

The lack of respect of some politicians for democratic principles and the law presents a great threat to democracy, be it in African states or in Europe and elsewhere. But the biggest danger exists where populists and the mob join forces, since moderate politicians and the population may be misled for fear of the loud-mouthed, refugee camps are set alight, refugee camps are established in the proximity of borders, media representatives as well as civil society organisations are hindered in doing their work.

In the Weimar Republic a part of the elites sold out democracy to Hitler. An influential part of right-wing citizens wanted to return to the past after the shameful defeat of Germany in World War I, they wanted to abolish democracy and reinstate Germany as a world power. The broad masses of the population felt alienated from the operation of parliament as a result of mass unemployment and the propaganda machine against the «Reichstag talk-shop». The deconstruction of democracy and law progressed rapidly under the Nazi regime, most probably because of the ruthlessness of the regime, but also because the understanding of democracy and law had already been undermined before Hitler seized power and there was a lack of strong civil society organisations.

THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY IS UNDER THREAT – SOUTH AFRICA AND SENEGAL

In many places around the world democracy is retreating. In mass societies shattered by rising inequality and cultural change, authoritarian populists find the mob they need to restrict or even to abolish democracy. The degree of social disintegration, the masses of declassified people or «destructive characters» (Walter Benjamin), that are actually or - like the *white* working class in the USA - imaginarily standing at the periphery of society, are not taken seriously by «those at the top», and have taken on threatening numbers. Then what does the future of democracy hold in African countries? Two very different countries, South Africa and Senegal, the one being a young African democracy, the other being one of the oldest and

most stable democracies of the continent, can be taken as point of departure for a discussion on the future of democracy and its threats.

Hardly any other country suffers as much from social disintegration as South Africa. Poverty, inequality, broken families, drug abuse and violence are characteristic of the South African society and look back on 300 years of history through colonialism and apartheid. In the past years, under the auspices of neoliberalism and a blatant disregard of the problems in the country by those in power, the gap between young people with good and bad opportunities in life has further widened. Burning houses, fleeing and killed migrants as well as countless demonstrations and riots are an indication of the danger in which the country finds itself twenty-three years after the first free and democratic elections. The number of people who are prepared to destroy everything in order to be able to jump to a presumably better future is on the increase. They only need the command of a leader. Julius Malema, the former leader of the ANC Youth League, sees himself as a strong man. Some years ago he founded a new movement, the Economic Freedom Fighters. Malema offers simple solutions to the big problems of the country. In his eyes, the whites are to be blamed, the colonialists, the apartheid rulers, the white farmers. As his mentor, Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, Malema is promoting the expropriation of white farms, the redistribution of wealth as a solution. The idea of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu of a rainbow nation no longer is an option for him. He is forcefully demanding the second part of the revolution, that of equality after freedom. In Zimbabwe, the wild expropriation of farmers without negotiations has left the country in shambles. In the last local elections in 2016 only 8.2 percent of the electorate voted in favour of Malema's battering neo-nationalist authoritarianism.

In the West of the African continent lies the small country of Senegal. It is characterised by the fact that, contrary to many countries in Africa, it has never seen a violent coup since its independence in 1960. Instead, it has brought about two relatively peaceful democratic changes in the past two decades and is considered a showcase democracy on the African continent. Yet, Senegal is not politically perfect either. This can be testified by the mayor of Dakar, Khalifa Sall, who is in prison since the beginning of March 2017. As possible contender to the president in office he acted somewhat too boldly and in July 2017 the next parliamentary elections (RFI 2017) are to be held. According to the Freedom House Index the country is considered to be «free». It displays good values as far as political rights and civil liberties are concerned (Freedom House 2016). Violence in society is comparably low, political demonstrations and riots generally remain peaceful. Drug abuse in the mainly Islamic society is also moderate (Osmanovic 2017). Family structures are largely stable, but even in Senegal – by Western measures – the emancipation of women is far from ideal. The degree of social

disintegration is low, although the economic crisis and neoliberalism also wreaked havoc in Senegal and the privatisation of living conditions drastically limits the opportunities of many poor people (Osmanovic 2016), families are crumbling under the burden of the social crisis and even in this traditionally Islamic country traditional values and norms are changing as a result of globalisation and individualisation.

Social stability in the country was thus far brought about largely by the Islamic Sufi brotherhoods. The many religious people in South Africa also find comfort in their religion, but in Senegal the Marabouts, the Islamic spiritual leaders, play a particular social role. They act as religious leaders and coaches in difficult situations, they do this practically with money and their network of connections (Jolys 2017). They are often the good uncle or the community that Putnam rightfully considers to be necessary, besides caring schools and parents, in order to lend the society stability and cohesion in view of the processes of change and to prevent the development of destructive characters (see Wilpert/Zwarg 2017). According to the Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf, the Marabouts, in combination with politics, give society the necessary support (Jolys 2017). The question remaining is whether this social cohesion will be able to survive in future in the context of a rapidly growing population, weak state structures and growing social inequality, as well as democratic demands that are increasingly being articulated, especially in the cities.

In many African states the democratic achievements of the 1990s are under threat. As in Europe and elsewhere, a part of the political elites has parted ways with democratic ideals or has never really taken ownership of these. Encouraged by authoritarian populists and undemocratic regimes in other parts of the world that survived the wave of democratisation in the 1990s, these elites together with the masses of disillusioned people, that are following them in search of old or new national stature, are pushing ahead. What will be able to stop them?

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