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Africa's thirst for democracy

By Kofi A. Annan

There is a saying among my people in Ghana: one head alone is not enough to decide.

I often think of that when I hear people say that democracy is alien to Africa, or that Africans are "not ready" for democracy.

In reality, African communities from the village upwards have traditionally decided their course through free discussion, carefully weighing different points of view until consensus is reached. So Africans have much to learn from their own traditions, and something to teach others, about the true meaning and spirit of democracy.

We need to understand that there is much more to democracy than simply which candidate, or which party, has majority support.

Of course, even that is not always easy, as one of the world's most successful democracies has recently shown us. But the US's current difficulties should not cast doubt on the value of democracy itself.

On the contrary, they remind us how important it is that elections are held within a broader context of democratic institutions and culture.

Democracy depends on the rule of law, because without respect for law it is not possible to hold free elections, to conduct them fairly, or to settle disputes about the electoral process.

Yes, democracy implies majority rule. But that does not mean minorities should be excluded from any say in decisions.

Minority views should never be silenced. The minority must always be free to state its case, so that people can hear both sides before deciding who is right.

How can people learn about those ideas? At the level of the village, they may learn directly, by face to face contact. But in today's mass societies they depend above all on mass media .

For an election to be truly fair, different parties and candidates should have equal access to the media. Neither state power nor the power of money should determine that one party gets a hearing while another is denied it.

The media must actively seek out the truth on the public's behalf, and be free to tell it as they see it.

Often, especially in times of conflict, that requires journalists to take real risks. Many have lost their lives in the quest for truth. We owe them an enormous debt. Even more, we owe it to ourselves to give them better protection. It is our interests, and our freedom, that they are upholding.

In mature democracies, parties alternate between power and opposition, as opinion shifts, and minorities become majorities.

But not all societies are like that. Not all minorities are composed simply of people whose views are out of fashion. Many are structural minorities - people who in some sense form a separate group, defined by race, colour, culture or creed.

If parties are formed on the basis of such group identities, a winner-take-all election offers minorities no security. A minority in power will not risk losing it, and a minority without power will have no hope of winning it.

Democracy can only work if all groups in a society feel that they belong to it, and that it belongs to them. Often that means ensuring, one way or other, that minorities are given a permanent share of power.

In some places that can be done by decentralisation, so that national minorities can win local power, in regions where they form the local majority. In others it may be done by provisions giving minorities guaranteed representation at national level - in the legislature, or the executive, or both. What is important is not the particular device used, but the outcome.

It is easy to state such principles, but not always easy to practise them, especially in a country that has just emerged from conflict, or one whose people are desperately poor and hungry. People in such conditions are easily manipulated by those who use force to seize power, arguing that constitutional rights are a luxury which a poor country cannot afford.

How often we have heard those arguments! "Democracy begins with breakfast", or "a hungry stomach has no ears".

But over and over again we have learnt, especially in Africa, that poor people's stomachs are not filled by rulers who refuse to submit themselves to the people's judgement.

We have learnt that democracy begins at breakfast - that power has to be shared in the home, between women and men, and from there on up to the highest levels of the State, and indeed of the international system.

Oppression is not an alternative to poverty. Nor is development an alternative to freedom. Poverty and oppression go hand in hand, while true development means freedom from both.

My generation of Africans has learnt, the hard way, that no State can truly be called democratic if it offers its people no escape from poverty; and that no country can truly develop, so long as its people are excluded from power.

The building of African nations has been one long struggle against poverty, ignorance, disease and conflict. It is hardly surprising that African democracy has known many setbacks. What is striking, rather, is the fierce and ever-growing thirst for democracy that Africans have shown; their indomitable courage in defying oppressive regimes; and their success, in so many countries, in insisting on accountable government.

My generation saw its dream of independence come true, but our dream of democracy shattered. Thank God we have lived long enough to see democracy spreading again through Africa today, and taking root.

This article is a shortened version of his address on 4 December 2000 to the Fourth International Conference of New and Restored Democracies in Cotonou, Benin (West Africa).

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