

Evaluating Democratic Progress in Africa

By Ozias Tungwarara

Using continental standards of democratic governance, AfriMAP is helping African researchers measure progress towards democracy and identify obstacles to further democratic growth.

One question increasingly asked in Africa is whether democracy is working. Are Africans able to hold their governments accountable for delivering the services that are important to citizens? This question is asked against a background of increasing poverty, growing income inequality and the devastating impact of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, all of which have generally eroded the quality of people's lives. This reality makes clear the need to assess Africa's progress towards consolidating democracy and to evaluate the impact democracy has on ordinary people's lives.

In recent years, evaluating the state and quality of democracy has been an area of growth. Such evaluations have been carried out for a number of different purposes, including measuring democratic progress (Freedom House's survey), examining correlations between democracy and economic development (various political science indices), identifying how recipients of development assistance are likely to manage resources (donor assessments) and catalyzing national dialogue (International IDEA's State of Democracy). To achieve this last purpose, democracy assessments provide citizens with critical information about what is working and what isn't in their country's democratic transition. This information allows civil society to engage in public debate about what the objectives of democratization should be and what the key obstacles are to their achievement. Such civil society monitoring of state reform and advocacy for citizen priorities is critical to the creation of accountable and effective government. In this way, assessments of democracy in Africa can contribute to democracy-building efforts on the ground.

In an effort to make a similar contribution, the Africa Governance Monitoring and Advocacy Project (AfriMAP) was established in 2004 to monitor the compliance of member states of the African Union (AU) with the standards it adopted in relation to good governance, democracy, human rights and the rule of law. (AfriMAP is an initiative of the Open Society Institute's network of foundations.) Given the status of the third wave of democracy in Africa and the commitments the AU has made to democracy, the time is right for African civil society to measure their countries' progress towards democratization. After considering these topics, this article will discuss AfriMAP's goals and what it is learning from assessments.

The Right Time for Re-evaluation

In the early nineties, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union brought a certain euphoria to democracy activists around the world. The dramatic transitions that took place in the early to mid-nineties from autocratic (and in some cases openly racist) regimes to open and more plural societies appeared to herald the advent of an irreversible democratic dispensation. For instance, in southern Africa, the end of apartheid in South Africa and the collapse of Zambia's and Malawi's one-party state regimes gave credence to the notion that democracy was increasingly the only game in town. Constitutional reforms that established democratic institutions and sought to entrench the protection of fundamental rights placed most countries on a trajectory towards democratic consolidation.

But—some 15 years on—these newfound political freedoms and civil liberties do not appear to have translated into concrete improvements in citizens' quality of life. Recent experience has shown that democratic transition is not just a linear path from tyranny to open and pluralistic forms of governance. Today's reality is that in some countries democratic transition has been blocked, and in others it has produced democratically flawed outcomes. Now is the time for Africans to use democratic assessments to identify the obstacles preventing further democratization in their countries.

However, despite agreement that democratic assessments are useful, they carry their own challenges. Democratic development is (and will continue to be) a messy and uncertain process; thus, the development and implementation of appropriate assessment tools is more challenging than in other development sectors. In addition, democratization is essentially a local process. Despite the growing acceptance of notions such as participation, representation, political contestation and accountability as key components of democracy, the form and shape that democratic systems of

governance take will differ from country to country. Yet the discourse about assessing democracy has tended to be largely dominated by the search for universally acceptable and measurable indicators. The search for homegrown models of democratic governance makes the task of developing common frameworks for assessing democracy that much more difficult. In Africa, though, the AU has begun the process of identifying common standards that are appropriate for the African context.

African Commitments to Democratization

In recognition of the role that democratic governance plays in advancing economic development, the African Union (which replaced the Organization of African Unity in 2002) has committed to upholding standards related to good governance, democracy, human rights and the rule of law (expanding on commitments already contained in the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other African and international human rights instruments). The AU also pledged to uphold the standards outlined in the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), which included the use of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). The APRM is a tool African countries can use to monitor their own adherence to the standards for democracy and good governance set by NEPAD.

The commitments AU member governments made to improve democratic governance through adoption of the NEPAD Declaration on Democracy, Political, Economic and Corporate Governance and the implementation of the APRM are laudable. It is also a good sign that—despite heads of state declining to adopt a draft charter on democracy and good governance during the AU's seventh summit in Banjul (July 2006)—the AU appears to be committed to giving legal force to the declaration through adoption of a charter. The draft charter will be resubmitted during the heads of state summit in January 2007. However, the AU faces serious challenges in making sure that member states comply with its commitments relating to democracy, human rights and rule of law. For example, during the Banjul summit, the AU failed for the second time to consider a report of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights that was critical of the Zimbabwean government's human rights record. Such an action creates the impression that the AU is hesitant to deal with member states that are failing to meet their democratic commitments.

Increasingly, it is being acknowledged that Africans should find solutions to African problems. The AU's adoption of NEPAD standards and the APRM offer two tools Africans can use in doing so. However, it appears that actors from the national level (be they legislators or civil society members) have only limited interaction with AU standard-setting processes, which occur at the transnational (or continental) level. This fact makes the domestication of continental standards a somewhat ad hoc process. It is also clear that AU member states are not subject to domestic pressure to meet the democratic commitments their governments agreed to as members of the AU.

Democracy-building efforts in African countries could be made more effective if sub-regional and continental standards were made an integral part of those efforts, including democracy assessments. Using such African-developed standards as a basis for assessing democratic progress in a country is something few assessment frameworks do. In fact, most donors and democracy promotion institutions are quite skeptical of processes such as NEPAD and APRM. While it should be acknowledged that the APRM process faces a host of teething problems that include methodology and process issues, it should also be accepted that it represents a serious effort by Africans to assess and monitor democracy.

AfriMAP's Goals and Experience

As its full name suggests, the Africa Governance Monitoring and Advocacy Project is primarily concerned with monitoring and advocacy. With respect to the first goal, AfriMAP is an effort to give Africans the tools to monitor their own countries' democratic progress according to the standards set forth by the AU, which themselves aim to further political, economic and social development. AfriMAP complements and supports the APRM and other initiatives undertaken at the government level to ensure respect for democratic commitments in practice. It aims to establish a systematic and standardized reporting framework that links good governance and respect for human rights to progress in development. Currently, the project focuses on three areas: justice and rule of law, political participation and effective public service delivery. Through the use of in-depth questionnaires on selected themes, AfriMAP aims to go beyond simply noting compliance with the minimum standards of international human rights law to develop a deeper understanding of why shortfalls occur and to suggest remedies. Research is carried out at the country level, which allows for cross-country comparison and learning. AfriMAP also emphasizes the principle of mutual accountability for developed and developing countries in considering the effectiveness of aid.

AfriMAP reports will be used by civil society organizations at both the national and regional levels to advocate for policy reforms in specific sectors. Already, there are initiatives underway to support civil society advocacy aimed at the AU on a number of issues ranging from access to information, meeting treaty reporting obligations, traditional authorities and democracy, and weak institutions of governance (among others). AfriMAP reports will also

complement the APRM. The ultimate goal of the AfriMAP process is to establish a strong network of African civil society assessors that collaborate across borders and contribute to African definitions of democracy.

In the end, democratic assessments should be conducted by citizens of the country being assessed and not by outsiders sitting in judgment upon it. AfriMAP is helping to develop local capacity for assessment, to make critical information available to civil society and to encourage dialogue about democratic governance among members of government, civil society and business. But in each of these areas, it has faced challenges to be overcome along the way.

First, we are learning that there is serious need for local assessment capacity if democracy assessments are to be a useful part of democracy building at the national level. A small number of people, usually academics, have the necessary skills and are used by donor organizations to carry out research. However, donors and other democracy promotion institutions have made little or no investment in developing local organizations' capacity to carry out democracy assessments on a regular basis. AfriMAP has invested in a process that it hopes will lead to greater local ownership of the assessment process. African experts have developed a series of research questionnaires and have identified areas of focus for the assessments. These assessments have been carried out by local researchers working under the auspices of a local institution that oversees the research, facilitates a consultative process and becomes the institutional home for both the process and end products. This approach creates a good opportunity for local institutions and practitioners to develop and enhance their assessment capacities. AfriMAP has also provided practitioners the opportunity to learn and share experiences with their counterparts from other countries. At the AU summit in July, AfriMAP brought together researchers from Ghana, Malawi, Mozambique and South Africa who shared their experiences about the challenges they were facing while monitoring their governments' compliance with AU commitments.

Second, at a practical level, assessing democracy in Africa is hindered by difficulties in accessing information. Past authoritarian regimes have left a legacy of secrecy and lack of transparency that make it difficult to gather information that, under normal circumstances, should be in the public domain. AfriMAP researchers find that they often have to use personal contacts with government officials, or go through lengthy bureaucratic procedures, to obtain relevant information. However, when they can gain access, researchers often find that most democracy and governance institutions lack the capacity to properly document and store information, so that what they are looking for is generally not available. In such an environment, it is difficult to identify with accuracy the democracy deficits that need to be addressed. This fact needs to be acknowledged in the development of assessment frameworks. Donorssupportingdemocracy building in Africa should be encouraged to fund initiatives that aim to improve the collection of data on government function and access to this information.

Third, in most African countries, there is not enough dialogue between the different national actors (government, civil society and business), even though such discussion is a critical part of democracy building. For example, there is often little or no dialogue between government and civil society because civil society lacks the capacity to carry out assessments on the basis of which they can then engage government. AfriMAP seeks to change these circumstances by facilitating a consultative process involving key stakeholders debating and discussing the findings at different stages of the assessment. This is done through the use of roundtables.

For instance, in Malawi during the assessment of the rule of law sector, the faculty of law at Chancellor College convened two roundtables for debate on the report's findings that brought together judges from the high and supreme courts, members of the attorney general's office, the public prosecutor, prison officials, the police, the law society, academics, civil society organizations, donors and the law commission (among others). The report was published and launched with the full participation of key stakeholders, including the minister of justice and constitutional affairs. The process has precipitated dialogue among key actors, which the media has brought to the broader public. Now, the challenge is to take the debate forward in a structured manner that influences important processes, such as the constitutional review and the APRM that are already underway in Malawi. Similar processes are being replicated with slight variations in Mozambique, South Africa, Ghana and Senegal. Though these developments are quite positive, their downside is that the process can become quite protracted and may not be attractive to those who need to make quick decisions about programming development assistance or making investments.

In conclusion, it is clear that different types of democracy assessments (both qualitative and quantitative) have the potential to contribute to different aspects of democracy building. Clearly, external actors, such as donors and foreign investors, need to understand the lay of the land in African countries. And researchers and donors need to collect data for comparative analysis and objective measures. But these factors alone should not determine the shape of democracy assessment frameworks. Given the challenges of advancing democracy in Africa, an assessment that

identifies the causes of democratic deficits may be a more useful approach. In addition, democracy assessments that enjoy more local ownership could be more useful to democratization. They will allow the results to capture citizens' imaginations and engage their expectations about how they ought to be governed.

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