

ILLIBERAL DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA: THE RISE OF ELECTORAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN SELECTED AFRICAN COUNTRIES

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the emergence and consolidation of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism in selected African countries. While the wave of democratization in the 1990s raised expectations for liberal democratic consolidation across the continent, recent political developments reveal a widening gap between electoral processes and democratic substance. Anchored in the Hybrid Regime Theory, the study conceptualizes African political systems as “competitive authoritarian” regimes that combine formal democratic institutions with entrenched authoritarian practices. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design, relying on comparative analysis of secondary data from scholarly literature, policy reports, and democracy indices such as Freedom House and Afrobarometer. Evidence from countries including Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe demonstrates how incumbents manipulate legal and institutional mechanisms to entrench power under the guise of democratic governance. The findings attribute the persistence of electoral authoritarianism to weak political institutions, the instrumentalization of law (“lawfare”), pervasive corruption, and enduring authoritarian political cultures. The paper argues that these dynamics undermine democratic accountability, governance quality, and socio-economic development across the continent. It concludes that reversing this trend requires strengthening institutional independence, enhancing civil society engagement, and ensuring credible enforcement of regional democratic norms. Ultimately, the study underscores that without substantive adherence to liberal principles, Africa’s democracies risk remaining hybrid regimes that reproduce authoritarian tendencies under electoral veneers.

Keywords: *Illiberal democracy, electoral authoritarianism, Africa, hybrid regimes, governance, democratic consolidation.*

INTRODUCTION

The resurgence of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism in Africa represents one of the most profound paradoxes of the

continent’s post–Cold War political evolution. The 1990s ushered in what Samuel Huntington famously described as the “third wave of democratization,” during which numerous African states transitioned from military

dictatorships and one-party regimes to multiparty democratic systems (Diamond, 2019). This transformation was initially heralded as a triumph for liberal democratic ideals, promising popular sovereignty, accountability, and the rule of law (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). However, more than three decades after the wave of political liberalization, democratic consolidation across much of Africa remains fragile. What has emerged instead is a proliferation of regimes that maintain the outward trappings of democracy (regular elections, political parties, and constitutions) while systematically eroding the liberal foundations that sustain genuine democratic governance (Fombad, 2021).

Illiberal democracy, a concept popularized by Zakaria (1997), refers to a political system in which elections are conducted but citizens are deprived of substantive rights such as freedom of speech, judicial independence, and institutional checks and balances. In Africa, this phenomenon has evolved into what scholars now identify as *electoral authoritarianism* or *competitive authoritarianism*, a hybrid regime type where incumbents exploit democratic procedures to legitimize authoritarian control (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Leaders in countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe have perfected this strategy through constitutional manipulation, restriction of media freedom, and the co-optation of electoral commissions and judiciaries to maintain political dominance (Cheeseman & Fisher, 2020). Similarly, in Nigeria, successive elections since 1999 have revealed a persistent pattern of vote buying, judicial interference, and elite capture, all of which reflect the deep-seated structural weaknesses of African democracies (Adebawo, 2021).

These patterns reflect a broader structural crisis in African governance: the entrenchment of regimes that mimic democracy but function as authoritarian systems in practice. The erosion

of democratic norms has serious implications for governance, human rights, and socio-economic development. As Resnick and Van de Walle (2013) note, weak institutions, pervasive corruption, and clientelist networks have transformed democracy into a tool for elite survival rather than a mechanism for popular empowerment. Furthermore, the manipulation of legal systems, or “lawfare,” has become a new frontier for autocratic control, enabling rulers to legitimize repression through judicial and constitutional means (Fombad, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

The wave of democratization that spread across Africa in the 1990s created widespread optimism that the continent was moving toward liberal democratic governance founded on the rule of law, political pluralism, accountability, respect for human rights, and institutional independence. Although multiparty elections have become a common feature of political life across Africa, the quality of democracy has increasingly come under scrutiny. In many countries, democratic institutions exist in form but not necessarily in practice. Elections are regularly conducted, yet concerns persist over executive dominance, electoral manipulation, restrictions on opposition activities, media censorship, and the weakening of judicial independence (Fombad, 2021).

This situation has contributed to the distortion of liberal democratic principles and the emergence of illiberal democracies, where democratic procedures coexist with authoritarian governance practices. While political leaders continue to seek legitimacy through elections, many have simultaneously undermined constitutional checks and balances, weakened accountability mechanisms, and restricted civic freedoms (Levitsky & Way, 2010). Consequently, democratic institutions that are expected to promote transparency and citizen participation are increasingly being used

to consolidate political power and preserve incumbent regimes.

The growing prevalence of electoral authoritarian practices across countries such as Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and Nigeria raises important questions about the state of democracy in Africa. Despite the expansion of multiparty elections, democratic consolidation remains uncertain as electoral processes are often accompanied by institutional capture, patronage politics, media restrictions, and the use of state power to suppress political competition (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015). These developments have weakened public confidence in democratic institutions and raised concerns about the future of democratic governance on the continent.

It is against this backdrop that this study examines the distortion of liberal democratic principles, the rise of illiberal democracy, and the mechanisms through which electoral authoritarianism is sustained in selected African countries. The study further investigates how democratic institutions have been weakened or manipulated and assesses the implications of these trends for democratic consolidation in Africa.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How have liberal democratic principles been distorted in selected African countries?
2. What factors account for the rise and persistence of illiberal democracy in selected African countries?
3. What mechanisms are employed by political elites to sustain electoral authoritarianism in selected African countries?
4. How have democratic institutions been manipulated or weakened to facilitate the

emergence and persistence of illiberal democracy in selected African countries?

5. What are the implications of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism for democratic consolidation in Africa?

Objectives of the Study

The broad objective of this study is to examine the rise of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism in selected African countries.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine the nature and extent of the distortion of liberal democratic principles in selected African countries.
2. Identify the factors responsible for the rise and persistence of illiberal democracy in selected African countries.
3. Examine the mechanisms through which electoral authoritarianism is sustained in selected African countries.
4. Analyze how democratic institutions have been manipulated or weakened to facilitate the emergence and persistence of illiberal democracy in selected African countries.
5. Assess the implications of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism for democratic consolidation in Africa.

CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATIONS

Illiberal democracy

The term illiberal democracy refers to a political system in which governments are chosen through regular elections but where fundamental liberal principles such as civil liberties, the rule of law, and institutional checks and balances are systematically undermined. Fareed Zakaria (1997) first popularized the concept, defining it as a regime type in which “democratically elected governments routinely ignore constitutional limits and deprive citizens of basic rights.” In illiberal democracies, elections exist as mechanisms of legitimation rather than genuine instruments of accountability or representation.

Unlike liberal democracies, which combine electoral competition with strong protections for individual rights and freedoms, illiberal democracies maintain only the electoral component of democracy. Core liberal elements (freedom of expression, judicial independence, separation of powers, and protection of minorities) are weakened or absent (Diamond, 2019). Political participation is tolerated, but it is often restricted to ensure regime survival rather than the consolidation of democratic values.

Illiberal democracy, therefore, occupies a “gray zone” between democracy and autocracy. It reflects the persistence of democratic forms without democratic substance (Zakaria, 1997). In Africa, such regimes often emerge when ruling elites instrumentalize democratic institutions to legitimize authoritarian control. As Cheeseman (2015) observes, the democratic wave that swept across the continent in the 1990s created expectations of political liberalization, but over time, many states developed institutional arrangements that reproduce authoritarian practices under democratic banners. And this has led to what Bermeo (2016) calls “*democratic backsliding*” on the continent.

Electoral Authoritarianism

Electoral authoritarianism is a related but distinct concept describing regimes that conduct periodic elections while systematically violating democratic standards to preserve authoritarian rule. Levitsky (2010) conceptualizes such regimes as *competitive authoritarian systems*, where elections occur, opposition parties compete, and democratic institutions formally exist, yet the playing field is so heavily skewed that incumbents maintain overwhelming dominance.

Electoral authoritarianism differs from traditional dictatorship because rulers derive legitimacy from electoral rituals rather than coercive rule alone. However, it also diverges

from liberal democracy because elections are neither free nor fair. The electoral process is manipulated through control of the media, misuse of state resources, intimidation of opponents, and compromised electoral commissions (van de Walle, 2002).

Fombad (2021) notes that in many African states, electoral authoritarianism thrives on the weakness of institutional checks and the politicization of state agencies such as the judiciary, security apparatus, and electoral management bodies. Through these mechanisms, incumbents maintain a façade of pluralism while entrenching executive dominance. This form of governance has been described as the *dominant-party system*, where the ruling elite sustains its rule by winning flawed elections rather than suppressing them outright.

The prevalence of electoral authoritarianism in the 21st century highlights a paradox: while democracy has become the “only game in town” normatively, authoritarian rulers have adapted by adopting democratic symbols and institutions to secure both domestic and international legitimacy (Resnick, 2018).

Hence, electoral authoritarianism may be understood as a *hybrid regime*, neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic, where electoral procedures coexist with authoritarian governance practices. It represents the evolution of authoritarian control under democratic disguise, a hallmark of political developments in several African states today.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Nancy Bermeo (2016) argues that contemporary democratic decline occurs less through abrupt breakdowns and more through gradual processes such as executive aggrandizement and strategic manipulation of institutions. She emphasizes that modern autocrats often maintain elections while

weakening checks and balances incrementally. This view highlights that illiberal democracy evolves through subtle institutional erosion rather than outright coups.

Fareed Zakaria (1997) conceptualizes illiberal democracy as a system in which governments are democratically elected but fail to uphold constitutional liberalism, including civil liberties and the rule of law. He contends that elections alone do not guarantee freedom or good governance. This underscores the distinction between electoral legitimacy and liberal democratic substance.

Larry Diamond (2019) notes that illiberal democracy represents a key dimension of global democratic recession, where elected leaders undermine democratic norms from within. He emphasizes the weakening of institutions and the rise of authoritarian tendencies within formally democratic systems. This perspective situates illiberal democracy within a broader global trend of democratic backsliding.

Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way (2010) introduce the concept of competitive authoritarianism, describing regimes where formal democratic institutions exist but are routinely abused by incumbents to maintain power. They argue that elections are real but unfair, with opposition forces operating under significant constraints. This view explains how illiberal democracy functions as a stable hybrid regime rather than a transitional phase.

Andreas Schedler (2013) expands on electoral authoritarianism by arguing that such regimes deliberately create uncertainty in elections while ensuring outcomes favor incumbents. He identifies manipulation, coercion, and control of information as central strategies. This contribution clarifies the mechanisms through which illiberal democracies sustain power.

Thomas Carothers (2002) challenges the assumption that all countries are transitioning toward liberal democracy, introducing the notion of the “gray zone” where many regimes remain stuck between democracy and authoritarianism. He argues that hybrid regimes often persist without progressing toward full democratization. This reinforces the idea that illiberal democracy can be a long-term political equilibrium.

Nic Cheeseman (2015) examines African democracies and argues that many regimes maintain multiparty elections while manipulating institutions to entrench ruling elites. He highlights the role of patronage, weak institutions, and electoral malpractice. This situates illiberal democracy within the specific political dynamics of Africa.

Staffan Lindberg (2006) provides a more optimistic perspective, arguing that repeated elections, even if flawed, can gradually strengthen democratic norms and accountability. However, he acknowledges that this process is uneven and vulnerable to manipulation. This introduces a nuanced view that elections may still have long-term democratizing potential.

Guillermo O'Donnell (1994) introduces the concept of “delegative democracy,” where elected leaders govern with minimal accountability and weak institutional constraints. He argues that such systems concentrate power in the executive while undermining horizontal accountability. This concept closely aligns with the characteristics of illiberal democracy.

Nicolas van de Walle (2002) focuses on Africa, arguing that elections often coexist with neo-patrimonial practices, where political loyalty is maintained through patronage rather than institutional legitimacy. He emphasizes that electoral competition does not necessarily dismantle authoritarian structures. This

highlights the structural roots of illiberal democracy in African political systems.

Robert Dahl (1971) provides a foundational framework through his concept of polyarchy, emphasizing participation and contestation as key elements of democracy. Illiberal democracies, however, fall short of these standards due to restrictions on competition and civil liberties. This offers a normative benchmark against which illiberal regimes can be evaluated.

Michael Bratton and Nicolas van de Walle (1997) argue that Africa's democratic transitions produced regimes that combine formal democratic institutions with informal patronage networks. They highlight how these hybrid systems undermine accountability and governance. This reinforces the argument that illiberal democracy is deeply embedded in postcolonial state structures.

The reviewed literature reveals a broad consensus that illiberal democracy represents a hybrid political system characterized by the coexistence of electoral processes and authoritarian governance practices. While scholars like Fareed Zakaria and Larry Diamond emphasize the erosion of liberal norms, others, such as Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, provide a structural explanation through competitive authoritarianism. Meanwhile, Africa-focused scholars like Nic Cheeseman and Nicolas van de Walle highlight the role of patronage, weak institutions, and historical legacies. The literature suggests that illiberal democracy is not merely a transitional phase but often a stable and adaptive system of governance. The key gap, however, lies in comparative empirical analyses that explain how these dynamics vary across African countries, a gap your study directly addresses.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The appropriate theoretical framework for this study is the Hybrid Regime Theory, which offers the most comprehensive explanation for the rise of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism in Africa. Developed and popularized by scholars such as Levitsky and Way (2010), the theory provides a nuanced understanding of political systems that combine the institutional forms of democracy (such as elections, constitutions, and legislatures) with authoritarian practices that subvert these very institutions.

According to Levitsky and Way (2010), hybrid regimes, also referred to as competitive authoritarian regimes, are neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian. They exist in a "gray zone" between the two systems. In such regimes, elections occur regularly, and opposition parties are allowed to operate, yet the competition is heavily skewed in favor of incumbents. Ruling elites manipulate electoral rules, control media narratives, co-opt state institutions, and employ coercive tactics to retain power while maintaining a façade of democracy.

This theory best explains the phenomenon of illiberal democracy in Africa, where most governments outwardly adhere to democratic procedures but systematically undermine the principles of liberalism, such as checks and balances, civil liberties, and political pluralism. Across the continent, elections have become instruments of legitimacy rather than accountability. Leaders employ democratic rhetoric and institutions to mask authoritarian governance, thereby giving rise to what Fareed Zakaria (1997) earlier called *illiberal democracies*. The hybrid regime framework captures this contradiction by showing that democracy, stripped of its liberal essence, can coexist with authoritarian control.

In the African context, the theory explains the persistence of regimes such as those in Uganda, Rwanda, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, and Nigeria, where ruling elites manipulate electoral processes to entrench power. For example, in Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni has maintained a multiparty system on paper but uses the security apparatus, constitutional amendments, and patronage networks to perpetuate his rule (Tripp, 2010). Similarly, Rwanda's Paul Kagame has preserved the outward image of democracy through periodic elections while constraining opposition and controlling the media (Reyntjens, 2016). Even in Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy, electoral competition remains deeply influenced by state resources, incumbency advantage, and elite manipulation, which dilute the integrity of democratic choice (Omotola, 2010).

The Hybrid Regime Theory thus reveals that Africa's democratic crisis is not due to the absence of elections but to their distortion and instrumentalization. Elections are used to confer international legitimacy on authoritarian rulers while marginalizing dissent and eroding citizens' confidence in democratic governance. By maintaining the external forms of democracy, these regimes satisfy both domestic and international expectations while perpetuating undemocratic control.

Furthermore, the theory helps explain the resilience of these hybrid systems. Levitsky and Way (2010) argue that hybrid regimes endure because they balance coercion with controlled participation. Citizens are allowed limited political freedoms that create an illusion of inclusion, yet the boundaries of acceptable opposition are tightly managed. This balance ensures that the system remains stable without resorting to overt dictatorship, making hybrid regimes particularly adaptable in Africa's post-Cold War political landscape.

Finally, the Hybrid Regime Theory provides a precise and powerful framework for understanding illiberal democracy in Africa. It explains how electoral authoritarianism functions as a modernized form of autocracy, one that borrows democratic institutions for legitimacy but empties them of liberal content. Through this lens, Africa's political systems can be seen not as democracies in transition, but as stable hybrids where authoritarian rulers have mastered the art of ruling through democracy rather than against it.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design to explore the manifestations, drivers, and implications of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism in Africa. The choice of a qualitative approach is informed by the need to obtain in-depth insights into complex political phenomena that are not easily quantifiable (Creswell, 2014). Through content analysis of secondary data, the study examines how African regimes manipulate democratic institutions, control electoral processes, and weaken liberal democratic norms while maintaining a formal commitment to elections and constitutional rule.

Population and Scope of the Study

The population of this study comprises African countries that have experienced significant democratic backsliding or hybridization between democracy and authoritarianism in selected African countries. The study focuses on five purposively selected countries (Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe) because they exhibit different historical and institutional pathways toward illiberal democracy. These countries have conducted regular elections but have been criticized for electoral malpractices, suppression of dissent, and weakening of opposition (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015; Cheeseman, 2018).

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select the four countries under study. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to deliberately select cases that are information-rich and relevant to the research problem (Patton, 2015). The selection is based on three key criteria: (i) Existence of formal democratic institutions such as elections and constitutions. (ii) Evidence of authoritarian practices, including suppression of opposition and restriction of media freedom. (iii) International concern about declining democratic standards as reflected in global indices such as *Freedom House* and *The Economist Democracy Index*.

Sources of Data

The study relies primarily on secondary data, which include published scholarly works, journal articles, books, policy papers, official electoral commission reports, and datasets from reputable democracy measurement institutions. Key data sources include: (i) Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" reports (2000–2025), (ii) The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, and (iii) Afrobarometer surveys on political participation and governance.

Secondary sources are particularly appropriate for analyzing macro-level political trends across multiple countries and over extended periods (Bryman, 2016).

Method of Data Collection

Data were collected through systematic documentary analysis. This involved reviewing peer-reviewed journal articles, reports by international democracy-monitoring organizations, and official electoral documents to extract relevant information about democratic performance, electoral manipulation, and institutional erosion. Academic databases such as JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar were used to ensure the credibility and reliability of sources.

Method of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which entails the systematic examination of textual data to identify recurring themes and patterns (Krippendorff, 2018). The study employed thematic coding, focusing on categories such as electoral management, constitutional manipulation, civic freedoms, and elite dominance. Comparative analysis across the selected countries was used to highlight both similarities and contextual differences in the operation of illiberal democracy.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Distortion of Liberal Democratic Practices in Africa

The distortion of liberal democratic principles in Africa reflects the selective adoption of democratic forms without their substantive foundations. While democracy emphasizes rule of law, accountability, and human rights, its practice across many African states remains largely superficial (Diamond, 2019; Fombad, 2021). Political elites often adopt electoral processes and constitutional frameworks as instruments of legitimacy rather than accountability. As Claude Ake argues, democracy in Africa was largely externally driven and did not emerge organically from internal social struggles, resulting in weak institutional foundations (Ake, 1996).

This disconnect between democratic ideals and political realities has produced façade democracies, where institutions such as elections, legislatures, and courts exist but are manipulated to sustain executive dominance (Levitsky & Way, 2010; Cheeseman, 2015). Core democratic principles, including judicial independence, electoral integrity, and civil liberties, are frequently undermined through coercion, institutional capture, and patronage politics (van de Walle, 2002; Hyden, 2013). These patterns reflect the persistence of hybrid

regimes in which democratic structures coexist with authoritarian practices.

Table 1: Distortion of Liberal Democratic Principles in Selected African States

Liberal Democratic Principle	Expected Democratic Practice	Observed Political Reality	Country Examples
Rule of Law	Independent judiciary	Executive influence over courts	Uganda, Cameroon
Free and Fair Elections	Transparent electoral process	Vote buying, intimidation	Zimbabwe, Nigeria
Political Pluralism	Equal competition	Opposition suppression	Rwanda, Uganda
Media Freedom	Independent press	Censorship, harassment	Cameroon, Zimbabwe
Civic Participation	Active citizen engagement	Voter apathy, patronage	Nigeria, Kenya
Institutional Accountability	Separation of powers	Executive dominance	Uganda, Rwanda

Source: Author's compilation.

The table indicates that while democratic institutions formally exist across the selected countries, they are consistently undermined in practice. Key areas such as elections, media freedom, and institutional accountability show persistent weaknesses, reflecting executive dominance and limited political competition. This pattern suggests that democratic structures largely serve symbolic purposes rather than ensuring genuine accountability.

The Rise of Illiberal Democracy in Africa

The rise of illiberal democracy in Africa reflects a deep irony in the continent's political evolution. Since the early 1990s, Africa has witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of countries holding regular multiparty elections, a shift once celebrated as a triumph of democratization. However, these elections often mask authoritarian tendencies beneath democratic façades. As Zakaria (1997) famously described, illiberal democracy refers to a system where leaders ascend to power through ostensibly democratic elections but govern with authoritarian impulses, disregarding constitutionalism, civil liberties, and checks on executive authority. This phenomenon has become widespread across

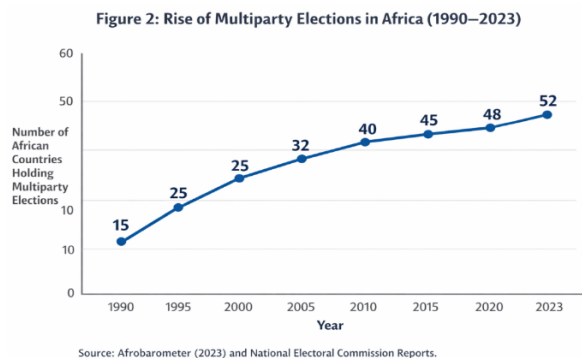
Africa, where electoral competition exists without genuine political pluralism or respect for fundamental freedoms.

Following the post-Cold War democratic wave, African nations such as Kenya, Uganda, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe adopted constitutional reforms and multiparty systems. Yet, rather than consolidating liberal democracy, these states evolved into hybrid regimes; political systems that combine electoral mechanisms with repressive governance. Levitsky (2010) explains that such regimes manipulate democratic institutions to maintain authoritarian control, using legal and administrative tools to suppress opposition, influence electoral commissions, and dominate the media. Leaders like Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Paul Kagame of Rwanda have institutionalized control through constitutional amendments, often extending presidential terms and tightening restrictions on civil society.

The endurance of illiberal democracy in Africa stems largely from structural weaknesses, fragile institutions, personalized leadership, and widespread corruption. Gyimah-Boadi (2015) argues that these weaknesses erode

accountability, diminish citizens' trust in democracy, and foster an environment where state power is used for political patronage rather than public welfare. The judiciary and legislature, though constitutionally independent, are frequently undermined or co-opted, leaving citizens with little recourse against executive overreach. In many cases, electoral commissions are captured by ruling parties, rendering elections symbolic rituals rather than genuine contests of ideas. Media repression and restrictions on civic organizations further consolidate illiberalism. In several African countries, journalists face intimidation, arbitrary arrests, and censorship for criticizing the government, while opposition rallies are violently dispersed under the guise of maintaining public order. As Fombad (2021) notes, these patterns have transformed democracy into an instrument of regime survival rather than a platform for political accountability or inclusive governance.

The graph below illustrates the increase in African countries holding multiparty elections from 1990 to 2023, highlighting the paradox of the continent's democratic expansion alongside the rise of illiberal practices.



The graph demonstrates a steady increase in the number of African countries conducting multiparty elections, from 15 in 1990 to 52 in 2023. While this expansion suggests democratization in procedural terms, it does not necessarily reflect the consolidation of liberal democracy. Many of these elections exist

alongside weak institutions, limited civil liberties, and executive overreach, confirming that the mere presence of multiparty contests does not guarantee genuine democratic governance.

Therefore, the rise of illiberal democracy in Africa underscores the gap between democratic procedures and liberal values. While most African leaders embrace the language of democracy to gain international legitimacy, they subvert its spirit by centralizing power and silencing dissent. To reverse this regression, African states must rebuild the institutional foundations of liberal democracy, strengthening judicial independence, protecting civil liberties, ensuring media freedom, and cultivating an engaged citizenry that can hold leaders accountable. Only through such reforms can democracy in Africa evolve from a hollow ritual of elections to a genuine system of participatory governance rooted in justice, transparency, and the rule of law.

Mechanisms of Electoral Authoritarianism in Africa

Electoral authoritarianism represents a political system where elections exist but do not meet the minimum democratic standards of fairness, competitiveness, and transparency. In such regimes, leaders manipulate the democratic process to maintain their hold on power while preserving a façade of legitimacy before domestic and international audiences. This phenomenon has become a defining feature of many African states in the 21st century, as leaders employ sophisticated mechanisms to entrench authoritarian control under the guise of democratic rule (Schedler, 2013).

One of the most pervasive mechanisms of electoral authoritarianism is electoral manipulation. This involves the deliberate distortion of the electoral process through voter intimidation, ballot stuffing, vote buying, and manipulation of voter registers. Ruling parties

often exploit state institutions such as electoral commissions to influence election outcomes. For example, the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission has repeatedly been accused of bias in favor of the ruling ZANU-PF party, including altering voter lists and manipulating vote counts (Bratton & Masunungure, 2018). Similarly, in Uganda, the Electoral Commission has been criticized for collusion with the incumbent regime, allowing the state to dominate the political landscape while giving an appearance of competition (Tripp, 2010).

Another mechanism is institutional capture and control. Authoritarian incumbents often co-opt or weaken democratic institutions, such as the judiciary, legislature, and anti-corruption bodies, to eliminate effective checks on executive power. Levitsky and Way (2010) describe this as “competitive authoritarianism,” where formal democratic institutions exist but are systematically abused. The judiciary is often packed with loyalists, while parliaments are dominated by ruling party majorities through manipulation of electoral laws and gerrymandering. In countries like Cameroon, the Constitutional Council functions largely as an appendage of the executive, legitimizing electoral outcomes in favor of the regime (Fombad, 2018).

Media control and restrictions on civil liberties also play a crucial role in sustaining electoral authoritarianism. Governments employ laws against defamation, sedition, and “fake news” to silence journalists and restrict access to independent information. In Ethiopia, for instance, before recent reforms, opposition media faced severe censorship, and journalists were frequently detained under anti-terrorism laws (Abbink, 2011). Such control of information shapes public perception and limits citizens’ ability to make informed electoral choices.

Additionally, co-optation of opposition and civil society is a subtle yet powerful mechanism. Authoritarian leaders often neutralize opposition through patronage networks, offering political appointments or state contracts to rival elites in exchange for loyalty. This blurs the line between state and party, reducing the effectiveness of opposition movements. In Nigeria’s Fourth Republic, ruling parties have often absorbed opposition members through “defection politics,” weakening political pluralism (Omotola, 2010).

Finally, security apparatus manipulation reinforces electoral authoritarianism. Incumbents frequently deploy the military, police, and intelligence agencies to intimidate voters, suppress protests, and control electoral outcomes. The use of force during elections in countries like Sudan and Uganda demonstrates how state coercion serves as an instrument for maintaining regime dominance (Cheeseman & Klaas, 2018).

In essence, electoral authoritarianism in Africa thrives through a combination of coercion, co-optation, and control. While elections occur regularly, they are neither genuinely competitive nor reflective of the people’s will. As Schedler (2013) asserts, these regimes exist in the “grey zone” between democracy and dictatorship, maintaining the form but not the substance of democracy. Reversing this trend requires strengthening electoral integrity, safeguarding media and civil liberties, and ensuring institutional independence to protect democratic processes from manipulation.

Selected Case Studies of Illiberal Democracy in Africa

Illiberal democracy has become one of the most pervasive political realities in Africa’s 21st-century governance landscape. While many African states conduct regular elections and uphold constitutional frameworks, the spirit of liberal democracy, embodied in the rule of law,

pluralism, separation of powers, and protection of fundamental freedoms, has been subverted by authoritarian practices. Across the continent, regimes such as those in Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and Nigeria demonstrate how political leaders manipulate democratic institutions to maintain personal and party dominance, thereby sustaining a façade of democracy without its substance.

Uganda serves as a paradigmatic example of electoral authoritarianism disguised as democracy. Since assuming power in 1986, President Yoweri Museveni has consolidated control through his National Resistance Movement (NRM). While multiparty elections are held regularly, they are characterized by manipulation, repression, and intimidation of opposition forces. Tripp (2010) observes that the Electoral Commission, whose members are presidential appointees, lacks independence and credibility. The abolition of term limits in 2005 and age limits in 2017 further entrenched Museveni's grip on power. Media censorship, restrictions on assembly, and targeted arrests of opposition figures, such as Robert Kyagulanyi (Bobi Wine), reflect how Uganda has institutionalized an illiberal political order under a democratic veneer.

In Rwanda, President Paul Kagame has built a centralized and disciplined political system that prioritizes order, development, and national unity over liberal freedoms. While elections occur, they are devoid of genuine competition. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) maintains total dominance, with opposition figures either co-opted, marginalized, or exiled. Reyntjens (2016) argues that Rwanda's tightly managed political environment reflects a "developmental authoritarianism" that suppresses dissent under the pretext of stability. The 2015 constitutional amendment allowing Kagame to potentially remain in power until 2034 epitomizes the manipulation of democratic procedures for authoritarian ends.

Zimbabwe, under the long rule of Robert Mugabe and continuing under Emmerson Mnangagwa, illustrates how liberation credentials and nationalist rhetoric can legitimize illiberal governance. The ruling ZANU-PF party used state violence, manipulation of the Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, and intimidation of opposition supporters to maintain control. According to Bratton and Masunungure (2018), elections were routinely accompanied by coercion, voter suppression, and the misuse of public resources. Even after Mugabe's ouster in 2017, Mnangagwa has preserved the authoritarian legacy, repressing protests and tightening control over the media and judiciary, demonstrating the resilience of illiberal practices within a nominally democratic system.

In Cameroon, President Paul Biya's regime epitomizes the durability of illiberal democracy. Since assuming power in 1982, Biya has orchestrated regular yet uncompetitive elections, relying on constitutional manipulation and institutional capture to prolong his rule. Fombad (2018) notes that the Constitutional Council and Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) function largely as instruments of the executive. Opposition parties face restrictions, while the state routinely employs coercion to silence dissent, particularly in the Anglophone regions. Patronage politics and elite co-optation sustain the illusion of democracy, while political power remains deeply centralized in the presidency.

Nigeria presents a more complex and dynamic form of illiberal democracy. Since the return to civilian rule in 1999, Nigeria has maintained regular multiparty elections and a vibrant civil society, yet democratic consolidation remains elusive. Elections are often marred by irregularities, violence, and the pervasive influence of money and patronage. As Omotola (2010) notes, Nigeria's political system

combines formal democratic institutions with informal networks of elite domination, resulting in what can be termed “godfather democracy.” Electoral commissions, particularly the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC), have made strides toward transparency, yet remain vulnerable to political manipulation. The 2019 and 2023 general elections exposed persistent challenges: vote buying, voter suppression, and intimidation of opposition, highlighting how Nigeria’s democracy remains trapped between aspiration and manipulation. The dominance of ruling parties, abuse of state resources, and politicization of security forces perpetuate a cycle of electoral authoritarianism within a constitutional framework.

In the final analysis, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and Nigeria reveal the adaptability of authoritarianism in Africa’s democratic age. These regimes employ varied mechanisms - electoral manipulation, institutional capture, constitutional revisionism, and coercion - to sustain control while preserving democratic façades. As Levitsky and Way (2010) argue, such “competitive authoritarian regimes” thrive where international pressure is inconsistent and domestic institutions are weak. Illiberal democracy in Africa, therefore, represents not a transition stage toward democracy, but a deliberate political strategy to maintain authoritarian rule under democratic legitimacy. Reversing this trend requires institutional strengthening, electoral integrity, independent judiciaries, and an empowered citizenry capable of demanding genuine accountability and liberal reform.

Implications for Democratic Consolidation in the African Continent

The rise and entrenchment of illiberal democracy across Africa have profound implications for the continent’s democratic consolidation. While the democratic wave of

the 1990s generated optimism for pluralism, accountability, and citizen empowerment, the persistence of electoral authoritarianism has weakened these prospects. Democratic consolidation refers to the process by which democracy becomes “the only game in town,” where institutions, political actors, and citizens internalize democratic norms (Linz & Stepan, 1996). In much of Africa, however, illiberal practices have stalled this process, producing fragile democracies that combine the formal trappings of elections with the substance of authoritarian control.

One major implication is the erosion of institutional credibility. In many African states, the independence of key democratic institutions, such as electoral commissions, the judiciary, and legislatures, has been compromised by executive dominance. Levitsky and Way (2010) describe this as a hallmark of “competitive authoritarianism,” where institutions meant to safeguard democracy are instrumentalized for regime survival. When these institutions are captured or manipulated, citizens lose confidence in the state’s ability to ensure justice, enforce the rule of law, or protect electoral integrity. For example, in countries like Uganda, Cameroon, and Zimbabwe, electoral bodies are perceived as extensions of the ruling elite, undermining public trust and discouraging participation in political processes.

Another significant consequence is the shrinking of civic and political space. Illiberal democracies often employ legal, administrative, and coercive tools to suppress dissent, restrict media freedom, and control civil society organizations. Gyimah-Boadi (2015) observes that such constraints weaken accountability and prevent the emergence of alternative voices capable of challenging entrenched power structures. In Rwanda and Ethiopia, laws regulating NGOs and the press have curtailed advocacy and public debate,

leading to a depoliticized citizenry. The absence of vibrant civic engagement hinders the democratic culture necessary for long-term consolidation.

Furthermore, illiberal democracy contributes to the personalization of power and the weakening of political parties. When political competition revolves around individuals rather than institutions, governance becomes unstable and clientelistic. Nigeria's experience demonstrates how political godfatherism and patronage undermine party ideology and programmatic politics (Omotola, 2010). Such dynamics fragment the political landscape, encourage opportunism, and impede the development of strong, policy-driven political movements essential for democratic maturation.

Illiberal democratic practices also foster electoral violence and instability. When elections are perceived as unfair or predetermined, opposition groups and citizens lose faith in peaceful democratic processes, resorting instead to protest or violence. This pattern has been evident in countries such as Kenya (2007–2008), Nigeria (2011), and Zimbabwe (2008), where manipulated elections triggered widespread unrest. As Cheeseman (2015) notes, the failure of electoral institutions to provide credible outcomes transforms elections from mechanisms of legitimacy into flashpoints of conflict, further weakening the prospects of democratic consolidation.

Another crucial implication is the erosion of human rights and civil liberties. In many illiberal democracies, governments justify repressive measures as necessary for maintaining stability and security. However, these restrictions (such as arbitrary arrests, censorship, and the use of security forces against citizens) undermine the foundational freedoms on which democracy rests. Fombad (2021) contends that when citizens are denied freedom of expression, assembly, and

participation, democracy degenerates into mere proceduralism, a ritual of voting without genuine empowerment.

Finally, the persistence of illiberal democracy threatens Africa's credibility in global democratic governance. As international observers increasingly recognize the superficiality of elections in many African states, external support for democratic aid and cooperation becomes conditional or reduced. Moreover, the normalization of electoral authoritarianism risks spreading regional contagion, where new or fragile democracies emulate illiberal practices instead of liberal ones. This trend not only undermines domestic governance but also weakens regional institutions such as the African Union (AU) and ECOWAS, which are mandated to uphold democratic norms but often fail to sanction member states that violate them. The implications of illiberal democracy for democratic consolidation in Africa are far-reaching. It undermines institutional independence, weakens civil society, erodes public trust, fuels political instability, and endangers human rights. Democratic consolidation requires more than periodic elections; it demands the internalization of liberal values, the rule of law, and genuine political accountability. For Africa to reverse the tide of illiberalism, there must be a renewed commitment to strengthening democratic institutions, empowering citizens, protecting freedoms, and ensuring that elections serve as instruments of popular sovereignty rather than tools of authoritarian entrenchment.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from the analysis of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism in Africa reveal that while democratic institutions have proliferated across the continent since the early 1990s, their liberal substance has significantly eroded. Elections, which are

central to democracy, have become routine political rituals that legitimize authoritarian rulers rather than empower citizens. The study found that most African states operate within what Levitsky and Way (2010) describe as “competitive authoritarian regimes”, systems that maintain the formalities of democracy, such as constitutions and periodic elections, yet subvert their integrity through manipulation, coercion, and institutional capture.

One key finding is the systematic weakening of democratic institutions. Across the case studies (Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Cameroon, and Nigeria) institutions like electoral commissions, the judiciary, and legislatures have been compromised through executive interference and politicization. In Uganda, for example, the Electoral Commission is dominated by appointees loyal to President Museveni, ensuring predictable outcomes favorable to the ruling party (Tripp, 2010). Similarly, in Cameroon, Elections Cameroon (ELECAM) and the Constitutional Council act as extensions of the presidency, validating fraudulent elections and suppressing opposition (Fombad, 2018). This institutional decay undermines the separation of powers and erodes public trust in democratic governance.

Another major finding is that constitutional manipulation has become a hallmark of illiberal democracy. Leaders in many African countries have amended constitutions to extend term limits and legalize prolonged rule. This trend is evident in Uganda, where both term and age limits were removed to perpetuate Museveni’s tenure, and in Rwanda, where the 2015 referendum allowed Kagame to remain in office potentially until 2034 (Reyntjens, 2016). Such constitutional engineering, cloaked in democratic legitimacy, reveals how African leaders exploit legal frameworks to consolidate personal power, thereby transforming democracy into a tool of authoritarian continuity.

The study also found that media control and restrictions on civil liberties are instrumental in sustaining illiberal democracies. Governments use legal and extralegal measures, such as defamation laws, censorship, and intimidation, to silence journalists and activists. Rwanda’s tight regulation of the media and Uganda’s recurrent shutdowns of social media during elections exemplify this trend. As Gyimah-Boadi (2015) notes, when the flow of information is restricted, citizens are denied the ability to make informed political choices, weakening accountability and participation.

A further finding concerns the erosion of opposition and political pluralism. Ruling parties across the studied countries deploy strategies of co-optation, patronage, and repression to weaken opposition movements. In Nigeria, defections, vote buying, and the dominance of political godfathers have created a system of elite consensus rather than genuine competition (Omotola, 2010). Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the ZANU-PF has historically neutralized opposition parties through a combination of coercion and co-optation, ensuring its continued dominance (Bratton & Masunungure, 2018). This lack of credible opposition perpetuates a political culture of inevitability, where incumbents face little accountability from either institutions or voters.

The findings also underscore that illiberal democracy undermines democratic consolidation by eroding citizen trust and participation. Many Africans increasingly perceive elections as predetermined exercises that offer no real change, leading to voter apathy and disillusionment. This democratic fatigue poses long-term dangers, as disengaged citizens are less likely to demand accountability or resist authoritarian backsliding. As Fombad (2021) observes, the persistence of illiberalism creates a vicious cycle where weak institutions produce weak accountability, which in turn strengthens authoritarian resilience.

Finally, the study found that international actors have often contributed inadvertently to the survival of illiberal regimes. Many Western governments and international organizations continue to endorse flawed elections in the name of stability and counterterrorism cooperation. This external validation provides authoritarian leaders with the legitimacy they seek, despite their repressive domestic practices. Cheeseman (2015) notes that such international complacency enables African rulers to perform democracy for external audiences while suppressing it internally.

In summary, the findings highlight that illiberal democracy in Africa is not a transitional phase toward full democratization, but rather a stable hybrid model where autocrats coexist with democratic forms. The key drivers include executive dominance, weak institutions, constitutional manipulation, repression of dissent, and international tolerance of pseudo-democratic regimes. The consequence is a democracy stripped of its liberal essence, one that legitimizes power rather than constrains it. To reverse this trajectory, African states must prioritize the independence of institutions, protect civil liberties, promote political pluralism, and ensure that elections reflect genuine popular sovereignty rather than the perpetuation of ruling elites.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

The rise of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism in Africa underscores a troubling paradox in the continent's political evolution. While democratic institutions and electoral processes have become more widespread since the 1990s, their liberal substance, rooted in accountability, rule of law, and respect for civil liberties, has been systematically eroded. The findings reveal that many African regimes now maintain the outward appearance of democracy while subverting its core principles through

manipulation, repression, and institutional capture.

This condition has stalled democratic consolidation, weakened public trust, and fostered political apathy among citizens who perceive elections as mere formalities. The endurance of such hybrid regimes suggests that Africa's democratization is not linear but cyclical, characterized by progress and regression. For the continent to achieve genuine democracy, reforms must focus on strengthening independent institutions, safeguarding media freedom, ensuring judicial integrity, and enforcing constitutional term limits. Ultimately, democracy in Africa must transcend the ritual of elections to embody true representation, accountability, and respect for human rights

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations are proposed to address the rise of illiberal democracy and electoral authoritarianism in Africa:

First, strengthening institutional independence is crucial. Electoral commissions, judiciaries, and legislatures must be insulated from executive interference through transparent appointment processes and constitutional guarantees of autonomy. Independent institutions are the cornerstone of accountable governance and credible elections (Fombad, 2021).

Second, constitutional reforms should be guided by democratic principles rather than personal ambitions. African states must entrench term limits and ensure that any constitutional amendment follows a transparent and participatory process. Civil society and regional bodies such as the African Union (AU) should actively oppose constitutional manipulations designed to perpetuate incumbency.

Third, promoting media freedom and protecting civil liberties are essential for sustaining democracy. Governments should repeal repressive laws that restrict freedom of expression and allow the press to operate without intimidation. A vibrant media and active civil society enhance political accountability and enable citizens to make informed choices (Gyimah-Boadi, 2015).

Fourth, strengthening opposition parties and promoting political pluralism should be prioritized. Opposition groups need institutional and financial support to compete fairly, while legal frameworks should ensure equal access to state media and protection against political harassment. Competitive politics enriches democracy by offering citizens real alternatives (Omotola, 2010).

Fifth, regional and international organizations must adopt a firmer stance against electoral authoritarianism. The African Union, ECOWAS, and development partners should refuse to endorse flawed elections and impose diplomatic or economic sanctions on regimes that violate democratic norms. External actors should also redirect aid towards civic education, electoral transparency, and institutional reforms rather than unaccountable governments (Cheeseman, 2015).

Sixth, citizen political education and participation must be deepened. Civic education programs should sensitize citizens to their democratic rights and the importance of active engagement beyond elections. When citizens are politically informed and organized, they can better resist manipulation and hold leaders accountable.

Lastly, domestic and regional collaboration is needed to build a unified front against authoritarian backsliding. African democracies should share best practices in governance, judicial independence, and electoral integrity

through platforms such as the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). More so, reversing the tide of illiberal democracy in Africa requires a collective commitment to restoring the moral and institutional foundations of liberal democracy, anchored on the rule of law, human rights, and popular sovereignty. Only through these efforts can Africa move from the illusion of democracy to its genuine realization.

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