

I think it would be a refreshing to start our discussion by hearing the meaning of democracy as defined in Penguin's *A Dictionary of Politics*, 6th Edition, published in 1969 and here we go: **From the Greek *demos*, people, and *Kratos*, power, meaning government by the people. Democracy may be either direct, and exerted by popular assemblies or by plebiscites on all legislation, or indirect, and exerted by representative institutions. Direct democracy was practised in some of the city states of Ancient Greece; indirect democracy, which is better suited to modern nation states with large populations, was developed in England in the seventeenth century and imposed on France and North America, as a result of revolution, in the eighteenth century. By 1850 the majority of civilized nations had adopted democratic institutions.**

Democracy in the sense of the word generally accepted in western Europe, the British Commonwealth, the U.S.A., is based on the theory of the separation of powers, q.v., legislation being carried out by a freely elected parliament and executive power being vested either in a government responsible to the legislature (as in the U.K) or in a president responsible to the people (as in the U.S.A.). This implies free choice at regular intervals between two or more parties; an election in which the electorate can only choose or reject a single list of candidates is not democratic in this sense of the word.

In addition to a separation of powers and free elections, other characteristics of western democracy are the rule of law, by which is meant a certainty that one is free from arrest unless charged with some recognized crime and that one will be given a fair trial before an impartial tribunal; freedom of opinion and speech; freedom of association; and protection from arbitrary interference on the part of the authorities.

Expression ‘rule of the people’ is interpreted in a very different sense in the U.S.S.R., and in parts of Asia and eastern Europe, though the title ‘People’s Republic’ is used of Bulgaria, China and Outer Mongolia. The principles of the separation of powers, free elections, rule of law, freedom of opinion, speech, and association are not generally accepted. However, the supporters of these systems regard them as democratic. There is state ownership and central planning to increase the national wealth. The private ownership of the means of production is regarded as undemocratic. In the U.S.S.R. no class differences prevent people from securing a good education. The governments of these Communist countries believe that the subordination of every interest and activity to the state ensures that the common good takes precedence over all private interests. This belief that Communism represents the true interests of the common man underlies their claim to be democracies.

That was the meaning of democracy forty years ago. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* published in 1998 defines the democracy as **‘system of government by the whole population or all the eligible members of a state, typically through elected representatives. The second meaning given is, ‘a state so governed.’**

One thing that is not in dispute in both definitions is the involvement and the choice of the people of the kind of system of government they wish to have. As definition of this word (which many leaders think they need not be taught the meaning because to them it is a household name) becomes shorter and shorter, we are witnessing the emergence of some kind of democracy that even the wisest choreographers may find difficult to put in context. We have heard of African democracy that interprets itself to mean regular or irregular elections regardless of whether they are free and fair. We have heard of western democracy. We have heard of the American democracy that allows for regular election but they are not always free, as we have recently learnt. Now the question we should ask ourselves is this: Is the holding of regular election adequate measure that a country is democratic?

My own definition of democracy is a system of government or political system that allows citizens' to elect leaders of their own choice and ensures the observance and upholding of universally accepted standards and norms.

Democracy does not end with free and fair election: that is where it starts and it must be shown the long way forward and all obstacles must be removed. We have heard the worst dictatorships describing themselves as 'democratic republics.' This is adequate proof that the word is least understood or deliberately misinterpreted.

Interpretations aside, democracy is a word that does not go down well with dictators especially in Africa. Democracy is a bitter pepper that has been rammed down their throats. Seventy-five percent of African states would not have embraced democracy if it were not made a prerequisite to badly needed aid to support their mismanaged economies.

Africa had no part to play in the introduction of the new technologies. The Internet revolution found the African peoples struggling against gross human rights violations, misrule, corruption, poverty, tribalism, diseases and adverse weather. Even as the new technologies spread like wild fire throughout the world, Africa remains marginalised. According to an article in the Spring 2001 edition of the *Carnegie Reporter Magazine*, the continent is at the throes of a digital famine. Poverty, poor infrastructure and unfriendly regulations have resulted in a situation where computer penetration is less than 0.3 percent and only 2.5 percent of the world television. Let's get down to the basics: Kanunga, a village in Central Kenya where NDIMA secretariat is based, has 1850 homesteads or families. The population is 6000. There are approximately 2500 radio sets and 500 television sets. There are less than 5 computers and no more than three fax machines. The village is served with 50 grounded telephone lines. There is one print media outlet that sells on average 10 newspapers a day during weekdays and 50 during weekends. Surprising but true, there are approximately 60 mobile phone subscribers. I say surprising because this service was made available for use by the general public less

than two years ago. It is therefore surprising that even people, who hitherto had no use for a grounded telephone installation, have been quick to acquire mobile phone. The reasons are simple to understand: convenience, accessibility and reliability. Grounded lines often fall prey to vandalism and can be frustratingly difficult to connect. Besides the mobile phones, computers and fax machines, none of the facilities available to Kanunga residents qualifies to be called modern. Most of the equipment for use with the new technologies demand alternate or direct power source and a telephone connection for them to work. These two components are rare in many countries of Africa. Rural electrification and telephone services are often find a place in many African governments' development agenda but the implementation remains a mirage.

It is evidently clear from the above case that the most popular tool for communication available to residents of Kanunga and to a majority of Kenyans is the radio and, in all probabilities, a radio that is the government's mouthpiece. The freeing of the airwaves by African governments has been a discriminatory and frustrating process. Many governments realize that without a reliable and constant source of information, democratization can never succeed. It is therefore in the interest of totalitarian governments to try and suppress the free flow of information by denying licences to independent media groups so as to ensure that the only information available is from the state-owned or sponsored media.

President Sam Nuyoma of Namibia put it very clearly in his statement recently during the Press Freedom Day celebrations in Windhoek, Namibia, **“There is no denying that the free and unrestricted flow of information is a powerful tool in enhancing knowledge and democracy. The power of information has increased manifold with the introduction of new information and communication technologies that shrunk the world into a global village. Equipment and multimedia applications have brought the world, its leaders and its nations, its problems and its victories into our living rooms. Information is the strong foundation on which democracy is built. Information has the ability to empower and motivate people to take charge of their own destinies and to contribute to self-development as well as national and**

continental development in order to eradicate suffering and evils from the face of our continent.”

Over the past five years, the number of African countries with Internet access has grown from eleven to over fifty-four after Somalia went online at the end of 2000. At the same time, the number of dial up internet accounts stands at just over a million with an estimate usage of three people per account. Of these projected 3 millions users, approximately two thirds are based in South Africa and about 600,000 in North Africa with the rest of the continent sharing half a million users among 50 countries.

The new communication technologies have been extremely useful in facilitating and promoting democracy in Africa. Non-Governmental Organisations, pluralistic and independent media have over the past decade, taken a leading role in educating the masses of the people on how their rights are violated, how to elect leaders of their choice, and where to seek redress when their rights are trampled upon or denied. The result has been the birth of opposition political parties and governments that are increasingly aware that the democratic world is watching them. Largely, these parties and NGOs owe their success to the fact that they have always been one step ahead of governments in making use of the new technologies. Although a fax machine is not an entirely new tool, it has been used effectively by NGOs to communicate. It has been difficult for authorities to intercept fax messages. But many of them have adopted the new communication technology with the sole purpose of countering the challenge by opposition political parties and NGOs. Only days after a Kenyan opposition political party, the Democratic Party (DP) launched a website, the ruling party, Kenya African National Union (KANU) launched its own. Western media have often come under attack by African leaders for alleged bias of the continent in their news coverage. The Internet now offers African governments an opportunity to prove to the world that the devil is not as black as he is painted.

As I have already pointed out radio and in particular short wave radios have played a crucial role of educating people in Africa. When authorities muzzle the press or state

sponsored media fail to inform the taxpayers, in most cases, the only source of information has been foreign radio stations such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, Deutsche Welle, Voice of America and others. During the abortive coup in Kenya in August 1982 several people lost their lives after heeding a government advice delivered by the state-owned Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, that the city was calm. Those that listened to independent radio broadcasts like the ones I have described above kept away from the capital until calm was restored, after several days.

People in Africa, where coups and countercoups are common, may or may not realize the crucial role these foreign broadcasting stations have played in saving lives. Their short-wave broadcasts are clear, devoid of bias and can be heard across borders. And since most of them broadcast in various national languages, they've become immensely popular.

The launching of World Space digital radios into the audio satellite broadcasting has ushered in a round-the-clock service but again, only the well-to-do people can afford to buy the equipment.

In order to narrow the ever-widening digital divide African governments must, before their Internet war of words with the opposition picks up speed, ensure that electricity and telephone services are made available to people living in the rural areas. Secondly, these services must be offered at prices that are affordable to the people most of whom have no regular source of income.

They say if you can't beat them, join them. Pressure from within and without for African governments to liberalize the airwaves has prompted the ruling clique and the financially well-to-do to purchase telecommunication companies and media houses. This means the same people who prevented the free flow of information during the single party dictatorship, have now become the disseminators of the same. It is another way of controlling and censoring information. While there is nothing wrong in leaders owning media houses or being the Internet Service Providers, the ownership is likely to slow

down the pace of democratization and the free flow of information. Again, while much of the information available on the Internet is free, prohibitive connectivity costs have severely hampered accessibility in countries of the Southern hemisphere. If this trend is allowed to continue democracy will be for the privileged few in the north while those in the south continue to suffer the digital divide.

There is also the danger of the new technologies ending up as tools for commercial companies and their agents to capture new markets at the expenses of promoting democracy. The danger can be averted by increasing support to organisations working for democracy and human rights such as the International IDEA and indeed the Network for the Defence of Independent Media in Africa (NDIMA).