
THE LENS

THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED ARTICLE:

State of Democracy and Human Rights in Africa

- By Nyasha Mpani

STATE OF DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA

Democracy in Africa is under threat. Last year the continent witnessed more coups than in the previous two years. This year already the continent has already witnessed two, namely the takeover by the army in Burkina Faso and a failed attempt in Guinea Bissau. Coups are once again becoming fashionable and particularly so in West Africa, which has now infamously been dubbed the “coup belt”.

Their occurrence bears testimony to the growing fragility in the region, while the African Union’s inability to take a forceful stance create the impression of either tolerance or an inability to exert influence in this regard. The frequency of these coups is in contradiction with the Africa Union's Agenda 2063, which puts much emphasis on a peaceful and secure Africa.

In addition to the military challenges to state authority, the continent is continuously battling with a human rights crisis. Right now, the most pressing instance is the situation in Ethiopia where the Tigray war has left thousands homeless and without food, while reports of rape and torture abound. In Sudan, the military junta continue to make use of excessive and lethal force against pro-democracy protesters who are against the military government. The military coup thugs are using a plethora of nefarious means to kill protesters in a bid to consolidate Gen Abdel Fattah al-Burhan’s hold to power.

The Covid-19 pandemic has further worsened the state of democracy and human rights in Africa. A number of governments have seen it as a perfectly fine accident to consolidate power.

Emergency laws and states of emergency have been declared which have had far-reaching consequences for political participation and inclusion and risking a new crisis of democracy.

The virus is being used to muzzle citizens' basic freedoms and rights, clamp down on media and civil society organisations in particular those working in the field of advocacy, democracy and human rights. Deployment of military and police by African governments to enforce lockdown regulations under the pretext of "law and order" connects reciprocally with the crony orientation of accumulation and a grip on power which is now a major setback on democracy in Africa.

Democratic life has, furthermore, been curtailed, through the postponement of elections and suspension of parliamentary work rights and freedom.

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Consequently, State sanctioned torture is still rampant in Africa with cases of enforced disappearance being on the rise. High torture cases have been reported in countries such as Uganda where during the run up to elections in 2020 a number of torture cases were reported.

Some recent example(s) of torture has been the abduction, torture and sexual assault of Alexadreas Marinos by Ugandan security services for her support of an opposition party (National Unity Platform).

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In Sudan, cases of torture, rape and abuse of women by the military are daily reported as the military regime continue to use orthodox means to entrench power. In many instances, elections, where they do occur, continue to be heavily violent and undemocratic. The recent by-elections in Zimbabwe were, for example, marred by cases of intimidation and violence. Clear evidence of vote buying, selective application of the law was also witnessed, with some opposition supporters being killed and injured during election campaign.

This confluence of circumstances has resulted in a decline in electoral and institutional accountability, which, in turn, has paved the way for corruption to proliferate. Notable cases of government corruption have been witnessed in particular in cases to do with COVID-19 relief grants or tenders for PPEs.

Cases such that of Dr Zweli Mkhize former South African Health Minister who resigned, following allegations of interfering in the procurement process to have a COVID-19 communications contract worth \$10 million awarded to his close associates. In Zimbabwe, Dr Obadiah Moyo was also relieved of his position as Health Minister on allegations of misappropriating Covid-19 funds.

Young Africans, remain most vulnerable to this steady deterioration of governance in Africa. In the absence of effective checks and balances to keep leaders accountable, they risk being further marginalised from opportunities to shape their political and material destinies.

Unemployment has, for example, been the number one major problem affecting the young Africans, but under the current circumstances their political avenues to effect change are diminishing. Current leaders may believe that the suppression of young voices in the short term may provide a modicum of stability, amid growing global uncertainty.

This would be a mistake. Young Africans must become part of the solution-seeking process today or, left marginalised, they will become a threat to the viability of states tomorrow.