

*Review*

## Elites and exclusive politics in Sub-Saharan African

Ibrahim Baba

Department of Public Administration, Mai Idris Alooma Polytechnic, P. M. B 1020 Geidam, Yobe State, Nigeria.

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**This paper examines democracy as a major and popular form of government which is finding ground across the African continent. The study also examines the degree to which political power is concentrated in the hands of elites while the ordinary citizens are relegated to voting alone when elections are due shortly after which they are soon forgotten in the governance of state affairs. Conducted with the use of secondary sources of data collection, the work examines some of the reasons responsible for the concentration of political power in the hands of few and the exclusion of the majority from the governance of state affairs. The article also explores some alternative solution to this type of political exclusion and concentration of power in the hands of the elites in sub-Saharan Africa since the end of colonialism in many countries in this region of the continent.**

**Key words:** Elites, Sub-Saharan Africa, democracy, government, elections, colonialism.

### INTRODUCTION

The point at which slavery ends, freedom is expected to begin. At the expiration of alien rule in countries across sub-Saharan Africa, the class which captured political power is itself a colonially manufactured segment within the society. The fact that occupation of elective positions is determined by the highest number of votes scored in election makes democracy a form of government consolidated on majoritarian principle. The rotation of political power or elective positions and public leadership among persons of the same class and social strata equally implies that politics which breeds leaderships is in the hands of the elites. The stratification of African societies along economic patterns was part of the colonial government political engineering directed towards the establishment of an agent with which state power would

be entrusted at the termination of colonial rule. The elites with whom state power was entrusted have continued to serve as domestic collaborators of the metropolitan bourgeoisie in perpetuating economic domination of African societies even in the post-colonial era. This has made the elites completely conceived by those they govern as the domestic agents of imperialism in Africa.

State leadership in the modern era and democratic dispensation is a property of the majority segment of the society. Across sub-Saharan Africa, the ordinary citizens are the majority. Besides social stratification, other factors like tribe, religion, etc. play a major role in the people's choice of leadership when elections are due. The accentuation to political power of citizen from the working or labor class in sub-Saharan region of the

E-mail: [babaibrahim194@yahoo.com](mailto:babaibrahim194@yahoo.com). Tel: +2348082676186.

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continent is often difficult. In cases where this has turned around to be possible, elites are in such cases not only aware but also in support of this cross class transfer of political power under a severe agreement and conspiracy to use the installed leader as a stooge for actualizing elites agenda and conspiracy.

Political power in a modern state, government and democracy is a popular instrument fabricated by the supports of the majority. Power is not an exclusive reserve right of the elites. It belongs to both the elites and the masses. The decision of who governs is not an exclusive power of the elites. It is the power of the entire citizens in their capacity as the total members of the society to and which they are all components. Sovereignty resides in the people in a democratic state. Inclusive politics is a good condition for the promotion of democratic governance. The act of circulating power among persons of the same social strata and class is an exclusive principle because it keeps away the majority from the governance of state and political power. The mobility of political power from one clique to another within the same social class and strata is a negation of inclusive principle which popular regime and government encourages.

In human society, all cannot be leaders. But the power to decide who rules is not also the function of few as obtained in some countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Through popular participation in election by voting in open, free and fair elections which are also periodic, the people equally participate in deciding who governs or rule them. Inclusive politics implies a system where majority without segregation are in as much as they fulfill the required conditions are allowed to participate in voting. After which they through their representatives can also participate in governance of the affairs of the same state to which they are also members.

The power to decide who rule the state belongs actually to the people. They can exercise this power through franchise. Whoever is chosen by the majority in a democratic state to occupy state leadership position automatically becomes leader. This selection is best done through voting in an open, free and fair election. The power to nominate candidate to contest for elective position is done by political party in a democratic state and system. Political party is membered by persons from different social strata and class. Therefore, for persons from the same social strata and class to always emerge as nominees of party when elections are due is clearly an indication that elites have excluded persons of other classes from the leadership of state affairs in sub-Saharan Africa. Elites' persistent consolidation of tight grip on state power and exclusion of some kinds of political tensions which if care is not taken may later on triggered social revolution in sub-Saharan states of Africa the way it has happened in the North African Arabian states of Tunisia and Egypt.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In Plato's academy, Aristotle pointed out that man by nature is a political animal. Hobbes, Locke's and Rousseau under the social contract theory also observed that men are moved to action not by intellect or reasoning but by appetite, desire and passion. Democracy was not only adopted as a form of majoritarian rule to give the citizens the opportunity to participate in the election of their leaders into elective positions. But it was adopted as an alternative to control the animalistic tendencies of men in politics and state leadership.

The political systems in Africa have undergone unprecedented change. The democracy revolution detonated by changes in global power calculus following the end of the cold war in addition to international and domestic pressures compelled African states and governments to adopt multi-party system and democracy (Abrahamsen, 1997, Gana, 1995; Whitehead, 1996, Diamond et al., 1997). This system resulted however, in majoritarian principle which democracy and multi-party system is often associated with. The concentration and rotation of state power among a selected clique of persons within the wider populace is itself not a reflection of inclusive politics as democracy requires. Elites have formed a clique to rotate state power among themselves due to their economic status and social influence, what Hornby (2001) refers to as elite. The concentration and rotation of state power within a clique of persons due to their economic status and social influence have resulted in exclusive and elite politics in states across the sub-Saharan region of Africa.

Elites rule and politics is, in practice, rule on behalf of the vested interests of elites. It is not a justification of majority principle. As argued by Mosca, Pareto and Plato, elites rule and politics in democracy do not reflect a true protection of majority interest because it is a product of elitism which believes that government ought in principle, always and everywhere, to be confined to elites. Some commentators regard majority principle as self-evidently the appropriate way of determining law or policy of state rather than resulting to personal views of selected persons usually known as elites. Legitimate political authority expresses the will of the majority. And as evident in Locke and Rousseau, majoritarian principle refers to the consent of the majority which in most cases represents the common good of the people (McClean and McMillan, 2003).

The modern state, for practical purposes, consists of a relatively small number of persons who issue and execute orders which affect a larger number in whom they are themselves include; and it is of the essence of its character that, within its allotted territory, all citizens are legally bound by those orders (Laski, 1982). States in Africa are modern from all aspects and ramifications. Both the smaller and larger number of persons who

execute and obey orders is all citizens of the state. Therefore, laws made and obeyed must be in the common interest of the state and of all its citizens but not of few or smaller number who issue and execute such laws. The small and larger number of persons as Laski (1982) posits can be referred to as the elites and non-elite citizens.

Political liberty as Appadurai (2006) submits is the indispensable minimum factor of democratic form of government. Inherent in this liberty as Laski (1982) asserts are the equal rights of all normal adults to vote and stand as candidates for election as well as equal eligibility for executive, judicial and elective offices provided the essential qualifications for the performance of these duties are satisfied. In Africa, democracy seems to be dodging away from this factor. By virtue of economic status and social influence, both the elites and masses can vote but on the other hand, the financial implication attached to standing as candidate for election has excluded the masses from enjoying such rights and made it a sort of politically reserve right of the elites.

In fact, small groups of elites which dominate politics, intellectual capital and business are at the heart of the failures of most African countries since independence. As a result of these privileged, minorities have become richer and more entrenched, while the poor segments of the African societies have become poorer. Most of today's African elite come from the educated political class of the first independence movements, traditional leaders or royalty and were the power brokers under the colonial system. In some African countries, departing colonial powers deliberately created small black elite, often from one ethnic group, as part of their divide-and-rule policy. These post-independence elites in politics, business and civil society formed a new aristocracy or network, had access to lucrative government jobs and contracts, secured public service promotion and benefited from economic empowerment and affirmative programs at independence to replace local ownership and representation in property, business and the economy; the beneficiaries were mostly elites from the dominant independence party (Gumede, 2010).

South Africa's African National Congress (ANC), Zimbabwe's Zanu-PF, Mozambique's Frelimo and Angola's MPLA are good examples of independence parties which created avenue for elites to capture and control state economic and political powers. Although the emergence of narrow elites challenging the control of state economic and political power by a group of the same people seems to be springing up across Africa. The activities of Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) in both Zimbabwe and Kenya which forced the ruling elites into adopting a power sharing deal and government of national unity are good examples of these challenges. Although far from emerging narrow elites constituting

themselves into opposition movements and parties to challenge the persistent control of state power and economy by old established elites, Wanda (2010) opines that referenda may be the panacea to tackle Africa's entrenched elites.

Africa's entrenched elites by virtue of their economic and political power have always influenced public policies and decisions made by them in order to consolidate their control over state affairs at the expense of the people they govern. State policies, laws and decisions are made to favor and protect the interests of those who made them but actually for the protection of the majority interests.

## DISCUSSION

The majoritarian principle promoted by liberal democracy imported into Africa from abroad may be to larger extent alien and unfamiliar to the particular generation which witnessed the transfer of political power from colonial to indigenous rule. But with time, this principle of allowing majority to participate in the election of representatives and leaders into elective positions through open, free and fair election is quickly gaining ground, popularity and acceptability among the current generation. This pattern of popularity which ought to make public leadership open to persons from various strata and segments of the society has only succeeded in giving the elite class the opportunity to dominate politics, consolidate their grips on state power, rotate same within themselves and turn persons from the other classes especially proletariats into instruments of gaining political power.

Economic power to a larger extent plays a vital role in the achievement of political power. The economy in post-colonial African states is in the hands of the elites and also partly in the hands of the metropolitan bourgeoisie. The economic interest of the northern hemispheric states and capitalists in Africa which has continued to necessitate their supports for the elites conceive as their domestic collaborators contributes seriously to the promotion of elite's dominance and exclusion of the masses from the political leadership of states affairs across the sub-Saharan region of the African continent.

The elites are just a minor portion of the population of sub-Saharan Africa. The fact that this minor segment of the population control states economies across this region of the continent has also continued to give the class an upper hand and advantage over the poor majority who have nothing other than their sweats to sell in return for money. Elites in this region of the continent are very good at taking advantage of the poverty from which the masses are suffering to not only dominate the masses but also to rotate state leadership among themselves and exclude the masses politically from the governance of state and public affairs.

Electoral laws and policies of states in Africa's sub-Saharan region are designed to favor the elites. These laws are designed by elite themselves in protection of class political interest. In cases where others are represented in adopting such policies and laws, their inputs do not have reasonable effects to make on the life and interests of the groups they represents. Elites are the dominant members of parliament in African countries south of the Sahara. They make laws for the states and consider certain sensitive national issues before they are implemented by the state or government. By so doing, elite influence state acts in its member's interests. The exorbitant rate at which forms are purchase at political party level to be able to contest in party primaries and also for elective positions when elections are due is a reflection of the view that elective positions are beyond the reach of the ordinary citizens who are battling to overcome the burden of subsistence. Masses are not financially buoyant to shoulder the type of extravagances that are connected with campaigns prior to conduct of elections in South Saharan Africa. Money politics incubated by elite is a political strategy of excluding the masses from having access to public or state leadership in this region of the continent. This logically leads not only to exclusive politics but also the concentration of state leadership and political power in the hands of members of the elite class.

## Conclusion

Democracy and political party politics seems to be getting funny and childish in action across sub-Saharan Africa with time. Masses are only needed when it is time to vote. As soon as elections are over, little or none is needed from them as contribution in decision making and government are formed with the supports or votes casted by them. This pattern of political exclusion in this region of the continent is another form of political domination and disenfranchisement. Elite rotates political power among themselves while the masses can only provide votes needed to authenticate the elite control of state power. State economy found control in the hands of elites. But then, one thing as Gumedede (2010) believes seems certain, unless the traditional elite in many African countries become more inclusive and open their doors to wider cross section of the society, widespread prosperity will remain elusive.

## Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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