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# THE STATE OF DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA: DEMOCRATIC DECLINE OR AUTOCRACY?

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## ABSTRACT

Many African states experienced democratic transition following the third wave of democratization that spread across the region in the 1990s. Such democratic states became characterized by multiparty elections, tolerance for opposition tolerance, media freedom, protection of human rights and respect for the rule of law. However, recent trends show that democratic growth has stalled while its gains are short-lived in many states. This is evidenced in the rise in third termism, constitutional coups, military coups and digital authoritarianism that plagues the continent – suggesting a wave of democratic relapse and autocracy. One is therefore poised to ask what the state of democracy in Africa is and what trends and practices have led to a general decline in levels of democracy. To this end, this paper assesses the incidence of democratic recession in Africa by adopting a descriptive and analytical approach that relies on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, briefs and internet sources. It was found that the decline in democratization, otherwise democratic relapse heralds an epoch of democratic instability and entrenched autocracy in the continent. This is not unconnected with the spate of bad governance, violent electoral contestation, digital repression and widespread violation of human rights that is prevalent on the continent. It was therefore recommended that priority be given to good governance, the strengthening of state institutions and tolerance for opposition.

**KEYWORDS:** Authoritarianism, election, governance, military coup, third termism.

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## INTRODUCTION

The state of democracy in the world is faced with pessimism arising from recurring relapse. This is explained using terms such as democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Karolewski, 2021), democratic rollback (Diamond, 2008), democratic decline (Salih, 2021), democratic reversal (Andersen, 2019), democratic erosion (Hartmann & Thiery, 2022; Silva-Leander, 2021), democratic recession (Diamond, 2015; Loanda, 2010; Zamfir, 2021) and democratic decay (Daly, 2016). The nomenclature regardless, these terms refer to a varying state of deterioration in the democratic process and the rise of autocratization. It describes a form of relapse in one or more of the principles and indicators of a democratic system. The incidence of democratic recession is neither typical of African countries, nor is it region-specific, but mirrors a global trend. Repucci & Slipowitz (2022) argue that in the United States of America, President Trump's claim of electoral fraud not only undermines the alleged superiority of the US electoral system but also impairs public confidence ahead of the 2024 general elections. This may also be a sign of the fear of losing and the desperation to win at the expense of the sanctity of the electoral process. In the words of the authors, "leaders who fear losing power in a democratic system have taken to sowing distrust in elections" (p. 7).

Advanced democracies including the UK and US have experienced democratic backsliding as they have fallen prey to attacks on the institutions of liberal democracy and populist post-truth rhetoric (Karolewski, 2021). Meanwhile, in the past ten years, one in five democracies has experienced a democratic decline. States hitherto classified as stable democracies such as Poland, Brazil, India and Hungary have lost points and are now defective in one way or another (Hartmann & Thiery, 2022). Emphasizing the prevalence of global democratic recession, the Economist Intelligence Unit (2022) in its 2021 Democracy Index avers that:

Less than half (45.7%) of the world's population now live in a democracy of some sort, a significant decline from 2020 (49.4%). Even fewer (6.4%) reside in a "full democracy"; this level is down from 8.4% in 2020.

The number of flawed democracies increased by one, to 53. Of the remaining 93 countries in our index, 59 are authoritarian regimes, up from 57 in 2020, and 34 are classified as hybrid regimes, down from 35 in 2020 (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2022:4)

The challenge of democratic relapse is worthy of scholarship given how the triumph of democratic transition has come under attack by authoritarian regimes. The level of democracy in 2020 is now likened to that of 1990 with a wave of autocratization found in 87 states; 68% of the world

population (Alizada et al, 2021). Despite recording the transition of more than 90 countries to democracy since 1974 and a surge in democratic states, democracy has become blighted by electoral fraud, violence, bad governance, social divisions, election rigging, abusive security forces and a predatory elite (Diamond, 2008) leading to an “incipient decline in democracy” (Diamond, 2015:142).

The global occurrence of democratic recession might be contestable (Anderson, 2019), but there is no denying that a relapse to illiberal democracy and authoritarianism is evident in Africa (Salih, 2021; EIU, 2022). Although African states made significant progress in institutionalizing democratic reforms and abandoned dictatorship and military rule to secure second independence, they have in recent times been victims of stalled liberal democracy. This is evident in the prevalence of weak civil society, a weak economy, a lack of credible opposition, weak democratic political culture, identity-based politics, recurring military intervention and a lack of regime change (Tar, 2010). Using Nigeria and Sudan as case studies, Akinyetun & Bakare (2020) observe that ethnic, religious and cultural differences are responsible for the recurring conflicts in the countries. Elites emphasize primordial identity among rival and antagonistic groups to exacerbate political instability to the detriment of democratic consolidation. Meanwhile, identity cleavages polarize societies with weak democratic institutions (Diamond, 2015).

I do not intend to generalize that democracy, at its inception in Africa had firm roots. As Loanda (2010) claimed, the democratic process was accepted in some states as a mere routine whereby elections did not necessarily engender meaningful change due to incessant corruption, electoral fraud and electoral violence. More so, it appears that the exhilaration of the tidal wave of democratization in Africa was exaggerated considering Africa’s history with authoritarian rule. To this end, Gyimah-Boadi (2021:6) argues, “residues of authoritarianism lingered, notably in the Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, and Togo”. This is because the “vestige of divide and conquer under colonial rule still plagues democratic politics in the region, and has produced devastating outcomes in Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, Nigeria, and Sierra Leone, among others” (p. 18).

This article seeks to answer germane questions: what is the state of democracy in Africa? What are the indicators and drivers of democratic relapse and autocratization in Africa? To answer these questions, the article adopts a descriptive and analytical approach that relies on secondary data sourced from peer-reviewed journal articles, reports, briefs and internet sources.

The remainder of this paper examines democratic relapse in Africa and the various indicators and factors driving the phenomenon. Concerning

democratic relapse, the next section appraises the concept of democracy and traces the wave of democratization in Africa with a specific focus on the trend of democratic recession and the rise in autocracies. An overview of democracy in Africa is presented while challenges plaguing democracy in Africa are also discussed. The section is followed by a discussion on the indicators of democratic recession in Africa. Pointers such as electoral violence, third termism, constitutional coup, military coup and digital authoritarianism are identified and discussed with specific references to their occurrence in various parts of Africa. The fourth section presents the factors enabling democratic recession i.e. bad governance, state capture, insecurity, corruption and poor economic performance. The last section gives a concluding thought on the paper and proffers practical recommendations including condemnation of military takeovers, improving civic participation and strengthening of state institutions.

### DEMOCRATIC DECLINE IN AFRICA

Democracy is an idea of the common good and general will expressed through elections and the exercise of political rights (Loada, 2010). Democracy is often misconstrued to mean the presence of elections and majority rule. It encompasses accountability, respect for human rights and the rule of law. A democratic system lends itself to internal and external checks and guarantees the freedom of civil society and the media (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). Generally, elections do not guarantee the strength of a democracy. Authoritarian states have learnt to allow for the conduct of elections without entrenching democracy. This view is better captured by Diamond (2008:37) that “there are elections, but they are contests between corrupt, clientelistic parties. There are parliaments and local governments, but they do not represent broad constituencies. There are constitutions, but not constitutionalism”.

The wave of democratization in Africa began in Benin in 1990 when university students and members of civil society demonstrated and forced President Mathieu Kérékou to organize a sovereign national conference. These pro-democracy movements quickly spread to neighbouring Togo, Mali, Niger and Guinea where sovereign national conferences were also convened between 1990 and 1993. In Cote d’Ivoire, the government amended its constitution to allow for the opposition, while in Ghana, the government embraced multiparty democracy (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). The democratic trend continued and spread to Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Cabo Verde, and by the turn of the 21st century, African countries had experienced democratic transition and constitutionalism. However, despite the widespread transition and its attendant advantages such as growth in parliamentary powers, freedom, peace, economic performance and social

development, Africa is recently characterized by a skewed trend – where democracy declines and autocracy increases (Zamfir, 2021).

To be very sure, the discourse on democratic recession is not novel. It began in the period between the First and Second World Wars when Ralph Adam Cram warned of the end of democracy. The topic was revisited in the 1970s when Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki were commissioned to respond to the perceived decline of democracy in the USA, Europe, and Asia (Salih, 2021). The striking difference here, however, is that the earlier discussions were restricted to North America, Europe and Asia, present debates centre on nations of the world, while this paper focuses on Africa.

Democratic recession broadly refers to the inability of the state to guarantee democratic precepts such as rule of law, free and fair elections, state legitimacy, minority rights, fundamental human rights and press freedom. Bermeo (2016:5) defines it as “the state-led debilitation or elimination of the political institutions sustaining an existing democracy”. As Salih (2021) argues, such a state of democracy suggests that:

State institutions represented by governments have become dysfunctional, defined by cronyism and corrupt politicians supported by the equally corrupt political elite. This imprisonment of state institutions is reinforced by non-responsive elected representatives, who, in many cases, side with those who have overtaken the state rather than the people who elected them. In a sense, the decline of democracy is a symptom of the crisis of state legitimacy (Salih, 2021:6) .

Silva-Leander (2021) differentiates between democratic erosion and backsliding. Democratic erosion describes a state that has experienced a decline in democratic quality in one or more aspects of democracy over the past 5 or 10 years. In backsliding democracy, gradual, yet impactful strains are placed on freedom and civil liberty through intentional reforms aimed at weakening civic space. This is the highest form of erosion. From the above, democratic relapse or recession is the breakdown of democratic principles of freedom, liberty and fairness to establish an authoritarian regime.

Bermeo (2016) identifies two forms of democratic recession: election manipulation and executive aggrandizement. Election manipulation involves pre-election machinations such as restricted access, intolerance for the opposition, harassment and hindering of voter registration adopted by the incumbent to ensure election victory. Executive aggrandizement on the other hand is the subtle removal of restrictions on executive power and the arrogation of more power arising from staying in office for a longer period. For Anderson (2019), democratic backsliding can be divided into two forms viz: electoral and liberal backsliding. The first form begins with the targeting of electoral institutions by displacing free and fair elections

and limiting opposition, while in the second form, the parliamentary and judicial institutions rather than the electoral core is targeted.

To provide a clearer understanding of the backsliding process, Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018) present a model that captures the various steps involved (see table 1). The 3-step model begins with targeting the referees of the state such as the judiciary through bribery, impeachment etc. The government then moves to target its opponents through blackmail or trumped-up charges. The final step is an alteration of the rules of governing such as a constitutional coup or changing electoral laws for personal gains.

Table 1: Model of democratic backsliding

Step	Goal	Methods
<b>Step 1</b> <b>Target referees of the state</b> The judiciary, law enforcement, tax and regulation agencies etc.	Ensure the loyalty of the institutions, so they can protect the government and attack opponents.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Blackmail or bribery</li> <li>- Replace civil servants with loyalists</li> <li>- Impeach Judges</li> <li>- Court Packing</li> <li>- Create new institutions</li> </ul>
<b>Step 2</b> <b>Targets opponents of the government.</b> Political opponents, critical media, business leaders etc.	To demoralize and weaken the opposition, and to dissuade criticism of the government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Bribery/blackmail</li> <li>- Charge opponents with invented or exaggerated criminal activity</li> </ul>
<b>Step 3</b> <b>Change the rules of governing</b> Legislation, constitution, and electoral system	Ensure the continued political dominance of the governmental political party	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Gerrymandering</li> <li>- Alter the electoral rules</li> <li>- Introduce legislature to favour the ruling party</li> </ul>

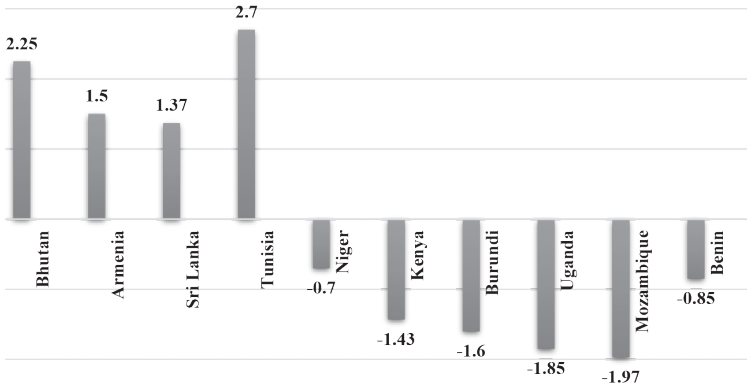
Source: Levitsky & Ziblatt (2018)

## RISE IN AUTOCRACY

That a rise in autocratic regimes has been recorded in Africa in recent times is unarguable. This is underscored by the Bertelsmann Stiftung Transformation Index Report that the regression in the principles of democracy and a rise in authoritarian rule with an abysmally low economic performance – the lowest in 20 years – are observable in different parts of the world; including Africa. The report shows that political transformation, economic transformation and governance performance experienced a -0.35, -0.32 and -0.21 decline respectively between 2012 and 2022. Sub-Saharan Africa continues to record a rise in autocracies, politically unstable regimes, one-party control and cult personality – all of which contribute

to democratic rollback. As presented in figure 1, compared to Tunisia, Bhutan, Armenia, and Sri Lanka that recorded democratic gains, many countries in Africa, particularly Uganda, Burundi, Niger, Benin, Mozambique and Kenya experienced democratic rollback in 2022. More so, seven countries (Mali, Nigeria, Zambia, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Tanzania, and Madagascar) are newly classified as autocracies in 2022. This classification of new autocracies is against the backdrop of the penchant of these countries to promote the abuse of power, limited freedom, restriction of civil rights and curtail the rule of law.

**Figure 1:** Democratic rollback in sub-Saharan Africa

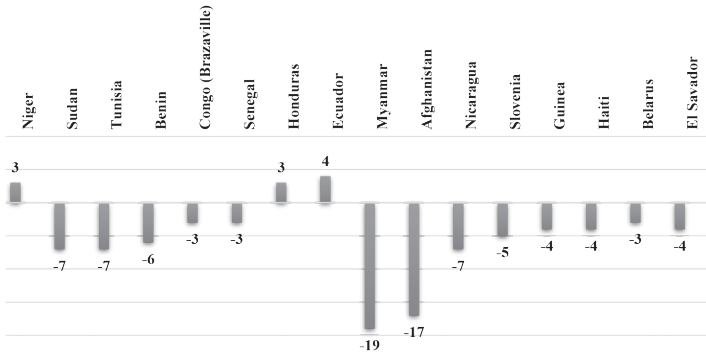


**Source:** Hartmann & Thiery (2022) | Author computation

The above submission is corroborated by Repucci & Slipowitz (2022) in the Freedom in World Report 2022 that authoritarian rule is gaining traction in the world. Noting an uninterrupted 16-year decline in global freedom, they observe that 60 countries relapsed in the past year while 38 per cent of the global population live in 'Not Free countries'; the highest recorded since 1997. In a survey carried out between 2005 and 2021, it was reported that the number of free countries in the world declined from 46.0% to 20.3%; not free from 36.1% to 38.4%, and partly free from 17.9% to 41.3%. Regarding Africa, they found that 44% of countries are not free; 15% are free, while 41% are partly free. Data from the Report presented in figure 2 shows that out of the countries surveyed for democratic gains and declines in 2021, the only country in Africa that recorded a gain was Niger (3 points). Although 13 countries recorded significant declines in that year, 6 are of African origin (Sudan, Tunisia, Benin, Guinea, Congo Brazaville, and Senegal) while the others are spread across Asia, the Caribbean, Europe, Central America and the Balkans. This indicates that the highest incidence of democratic decline

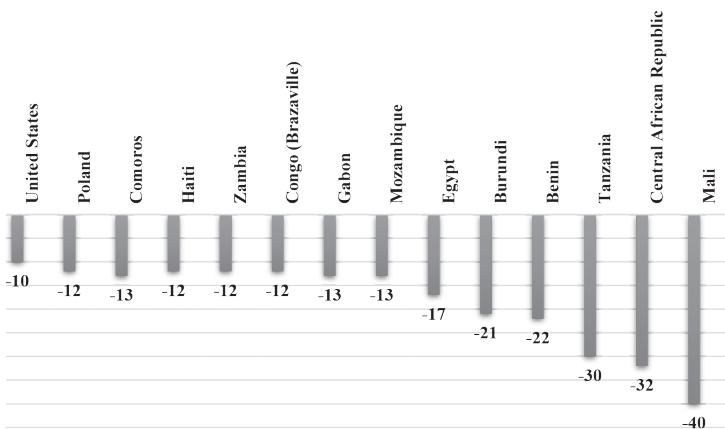
in 2021 was in Africa. More so, taking into perspective a ten-year decline in democracy, it was discovered that recession was recorded in every region of the world in the last decade. However, further analysis reveals that out of the countries surveyed, the most concentration of recession in any region was recorded in Africa where 10 countries (Mali, Central African Republic, Tanzania, Benin, Burundi, Egypt, Mozambique, Gabon, Congo Brazzaville and Zambia) had significant declines (see figure 3). Meanwhile, the highest incidence of democratic decline in the last decade was recorded in Mali, followed by the Central African Republic. By implication, therefore, Africa has been particularly challenged by democratic decline in the last decade.

**Figure 2:** Democratic gains and declines in 2021



**Source:** Repucci & Slipowitz (2022) | Author computation

**Figure 3:** Largest 10-year democratic declines



**Source:** Repucci & Slipowitz (2022) | Author computation



For emphasis, sub-Saharan Africa has the highest number of hybrid and authoritarian regimes in the world. With a low and declining democracy index, the region lags behind North America and Western Europe, among others (see table 2).

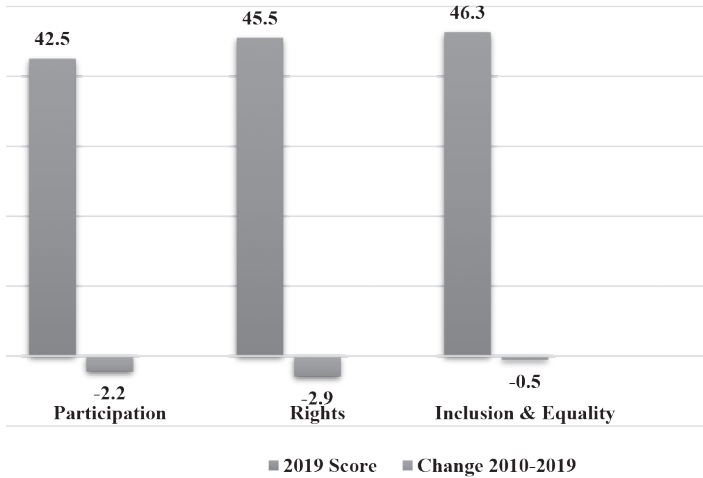
**Table 2:** Democracy across regions<sup>1</sup>

	No of countries	Democracy index average	Full democracies	Flawed democracies	Hybrid regimes	Authoritarian regimes
<b>North America</b>						
2021	2	8.36	1	1	0	0
2020	2	8.56	1	1	0	0
<b>Western Europe</b>						
2021	21	8.22	12	8	1	0
2020	21	8.29	12	7	1	0
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>						
2021	44	4.12	1	6	14	23
2020	44	4.16	1	6	13	24

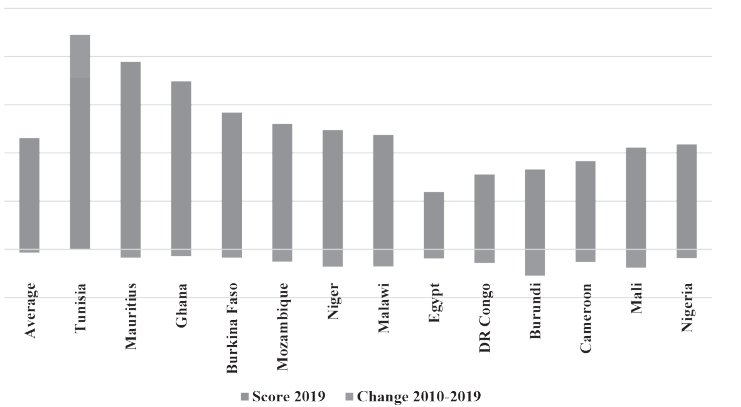
*Source:* EIU (2022:37)

There is also the challenge of governance which poses grave difficulty to participation and inclusion in Africa. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance Report 2020 shows an overall decline in governance, especially concerning participation, rights and inclusion. In the data presented in figure 4, the individual scores recorded in these indicators in the year 2019 are less than 50 while deteriorations were witnessed between 2010 and 2019. Meanwhile, using selected countries as the unit of analysis, the report – presented in figure 5 – reveals that while some countries (Tunisia, Mauritius, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, Niger and Malawi) scored higher than the average score in governance in the year under review, others (Egypt, DR Congo, Burundi, Cameroon, Mali and Nigeria) score lower than the continental average. More so, between 2010 and 2019, all the selected countries (except Tunisia which recorded significant appreciation) witnessed governance deterioration far greater than the continental average. This attests that a majority of the countries in Africa recorded increasing deterioration in governance in the last decade. Indeed, the pace of deterioration has increased exponentially since 2015, with an annual average trend of -0.33 compared to -0.16 over the decade (2010-2019).

<sup>1</sup> See EIU (2022:57) for a breakdown of the performance of sub-Saharan Africa countries on the indicators of the democracy index and their regime times. For emphasis, Mauritius is the only country in Africa regarded as a full democracy.

**Figure 4:** Deterioration in governance (Participation, rights and inclusion) in Africa 2019

**Source:** Ibrahim Index of African Governance (2020) | Author computation

**Figure 5:** Governance deteriorations in selected African countries 2019

**Source:** Ibrahim Index of African Governance (2020) | Author computation

The idea flowing from the aforementioned reports is that African countries typify states challenged by democratic recession. Besides from recording an upsurge in autocracy, there has also been a decline in governance with most states gravitating towards deterioration. This is because unstable regimes do not allow for economic growth or development. With the majority of the states now classified as not free or partly free,

African states are experiencing a rise in restriction of civil rights, limited rights, freedom, participation and inclusion. As the IIAG (2020) further reveals, participation (-3.5) and rights (-2.5) have significantly deteriorated since 2015. With an increase in censorship, limited press freedom, restricted freedom of expression, lack of guarantee of social freedoms and civic engagement, and constrained personal liberty, media freedom is the second-largest deterioration since 2015.

Although still largely unknown, it is believed that the proliferation of democratic recession is a result of the polarization of western societies, weak political institutions, failure of the political elite to address the inadequacies of the system, imitation and fragility of liberal democracies (Karolewski, 2021). Anderson (2019) claims that democratic recession emerges as a result of a weak democracy syndrome characterized by praetorianism (lack of control over the military and its perceived role in nation-building), weak political institutionalization (expected constraints on the executive by political actors) and economic performance. Praetorianism is evidenced in the institutionalization of martial law and the risks of a coup d'état while weak political institutionalization is defined by an appropriation of power by, or the undermining of the incumbent through non-constitutional means. Whereas, economic performance determines the spate of defection among political actors and the military capable of weakening the incumbent's ability to manage anti-system activities. More so, the insistence on economic inequality reduces public support for democracy and increases the chances of authoritarianism.

The above view was supported by Diamond (2008) that the failure of democratic states to meet citizens' expectations in protecting rights, securing freedom, enforcing rule of law, reducing economic inequality, curbing corruption and improving governance has reinforced the need to try alternatives such as authoritarian regimes. For example, China's economic strides despite not being a democratic state weaken the notion of democracy's superiority (Salih, 2021). This was aptly captured by EIU (2022:28) that "popular dissatisfaction with democratic political systems is driving support for political reform as well as a search for alternatives to democratic governance". Buttressing the view, Cheeseman (2018) and Gyimah-Boadi (2021) opine that the presence of illiberal regimes such as China, Russia, the Philippines, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Iran, Turkey and Hungary gives hope to African leaders on the supposed efficiency of an authoritarian regime for economic performance.

Jinadu (2010) identifies an array of challenges plaguing democracy in Africa which include a lack of confidence in electoral bodies to conduct free and fair elections, abuse of power by incumbency, manipulated nomination processes, falsification of results, manipulation of the

media, partisan pro-government security forces and electoral violence. As Diamond (2015:148) argues, “the biggest problem for democracy in Africa is controlling corruption and abuse of power”. The abuse of power undoubtedly constrains democratic progress. More so, the setback in democratic gains is occasioned by the limitation of political freedom, distortion of clear separation of powers and the limitation of the rule of law (Hartmann & Thiery, 2022).

Zamfir (2021) identifies two factors responsible for democratic recession in Africa: poor socioeconomic development and insecurity; and weak institutions. This is rooted in Loanda (2010) that the factors necessitating democratic recession in Africa are intrinsic and extrinsic. The internal factors are rooted in economic and political dynamics. The political challenges are a product of the resulting hybrid regime of the democratic transitions of the early 1990s to create an illiberal democracy – a system devoid of separation of power and an independent press – where elections are organized under authoritarian environments. Concerning the economic challenges, pervasive corruption and the desire to appropriate state resources impedes good governance, make development remote and constitute a bane to democratic growth. The author submits that the external factors also have a political and economic undertone. Politically, the incidence of constitutional anarchy has a contagious effect on the continent by tinkering with the democratic process of various countries. In other words, the success of a constitutional coup in one country reinforces its possibility in other countries. Economically, the exploitative tendencies of foreign economic power and their scramble for control of the continents’ resources act as an impediment to democracy. It is believed that corruption and inefficiency contribute to democratic recession. This is corroborated by Hartmann & Thiery (2022) that corruption weakens the quality of governance and the growth of democracy. Meanwhile, corruption is prevalent in Africa and is linked to autocracy. The authors argue:

By contrast, of the 53 countries in which corrupt practices can be carried out with virtual impunity (13 points), 44 are governed autocratically. More than half of these 53 highly corrupt states are on the African continent, where only South Africa (6 points) and Botswana (7 points) represent positive exceptions (Hartmann & Thiery, 2022:13).

Democratic erosion in Africa is also attributable to the prevalence of defective democracies. Wolfgang Merkel (2004) discussed the concept of defective democracy and its various forms. Defective democracies are democracies lacking constitutionality and are unembedded regimes – embedded regimes being democracies rooted in participation, accountability, democratic electoral regimes, civil rights and democratically elected representatives. Defective democracies are mostly obtainable in

post-autocratic democracies and patrimonial societies. They are caused by economic trends, civil society, nation-building, political institutions, level of modernization, the path of modernization, social capital and the type of authoritarian predecessor regime. Merkel distinguishes between four types of defective democracy: exclusive democracy – where fragments of citizens’ universal suffrage are excluded; domain democracy – the use of veto power by militia, guerrillas or the military to undermine the authority of democratically elected representatives; illiberal democracy – where the judiciary, constitutional norms, rule of law, individual rights and freedom of citizens are either weak or damaged; and delegative democracies – where checks and balances are eroded and government actions infrequently conform to constitutional practices. Meanwhile, the most common form of defective democracy is illiberal democracy (Merkel, 2004).

Illiberal democracies are occasioned by the absence of liberal democracy (Havlík & Hloušek, 2021) and are characterized by limited freedom, rights, accountability and equality (see Table 3). Yet, the incremental degradation of democratic rights pushes a democratic system into competitive authoritarianism. Diamond (2015) identifies various types of the breakdown of democracy in the world including a military coup, executive degradation, violation of opposition rights, human rights abuses, violence, military rebellion, political instability, electoral fraud, executive abuse, suspension of parliament, deteriorating rule of law and breakdown of the electoral process.

**Table 3:** Dimensions and indicators of Illiberal democracy

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Indicators</b>
Restrictions on freedom of expression	State control or political regulation of public service broadcasters Politically motivated regulation of journalism generally Political or economic concentration of mass media ownership, threatening pluralism
Restrictions on freedom of association	Legal regulations affecting the activities of opposition parties or civil society Economic regulations impacting the activities of civil society Regulation of other autonomous spheres, such as universities and academic liberties Politically motivated interference with private property and the autonomy of proprietors’ actions in the economy

Restrictions on the horizontal accountability of power	Strengthening the executive to the detriment of the judiciary or the legislature Regulations limiting or obstructing the opposition's checking of government via parliament or other institutions, typically in the form of amendments to the rules of procedure Limitations on the independence of the judiciary
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*Source:* Havlík & Hloušek (2021:115)

Of course, the Coronavirus pandemic also presented challenges to democracy. During the period, elections were postponed as in Ethiopia while voter apathy was recorded in the countries that organized elections. In Burundi, the quality of the election was blurred by the attendant restrictions of the pandemic while in Guinea and the Central African Republic there was a surge in election violence (Alizada et al, 2021). Indeed, the pandemic deepened the incidence of autocratization by reducing civic space (Silva-Leander, 2021).

The various factors identified in the literature as culpable for the rise in a democratic relapse in Africa such as patrimonialism, politics of the belly, and identity-based politics, inter alia, have been predominant issues in Africa even before the intensity of democratic decline. Therefore, the next section turns to examine how internal dynamics such as electoral violence, third termism, constitutional coup, military coup, and digital authoritarianism are indicative of the prevalence of democratic relapse on the continent.

## INDICATORS OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE IN AFRICA

This section examines the indicators of democratic decline in Africa. Attention is paid to indicators such as electoral violence, third termism and constitutional coup, military coup and digital authoritarianism. These indicators warrant observation given their recurring incidence on the continent especially in the last decade. For instance, the resurgence of military coups in Africa and the growing popularity of digital authoritarianism make them deserving of scholarship. Meanwhile, electoral violence and third termism and constitutional coup remain growing challenges in Africa especially considering the prevalence of zero sum game elections and long serving leaders.

### ELECTORAL VIOLENCE

Elections are an integral and essential element of democracy. It gives the people the platform to make a choice of leadership and actively participate in the democratic process. Despite this, “election quality is declining” in Africa (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021:12). Evidence shows that elections in Africa, asides from being organized as routine activities to maintain state legitimacy and appear democratic, are treated as zero-sum games where the winner takes all. This view was held by Loanda (2010) that the elections in Africa are branded by bitterness and acrimony aimed at crushing the opponent. The characteristic features of African elections are devoid of democratic culture and the independence of an electoral management body. Yet, in the case of disputes, the adjudicating body lacks public confidence when in fact, political parties would rather resort to violence than seek redress in court. In the case of Nigeria, elections since independence have been violent. They are fraught with intimidation, harassment, ballot box snatching, rigging, vote-buying and wanton destruction of properties. The elections which are characterized by a winner-takes-all mentality, are usually contested with viciousness and widespread violence. The result of these elections has been the loss of life and recurring violence (Akinyetun, 2021). More so, it is common practice in Africa for the incumbent to arrest opposition. Vivid examples are Bobi Wine of Uganda, Ousmane Sonko of Senegal and Hama Amadou of Niger. In addition, the June 2021 elections in Ethiopia were marred by conflicts and the arrest of opposition in the Tigray region (Silva-Leander, 2021; Zamfir, 2021).

### THIRD-TERMISM AND CONSTITUTIONAL COUP

It is commonplace for many African leaders to disregard presidential term limits. Leaders of Nigeria, Mali, Guinea, Togo, Tanzania, Cote d’Ivoire and Guinea have at a time either attempted to or have outrightly manipulated elections or perverted democratic institutions to elongate their stay in office. In Guinea, the attempt by President Alpha Condé to amend the constitution to allow for a third term triggered a military coup in September 2021 and increased the incidence of human rights violations in the country leading to the country’s drop from a partly free country to a not free country status (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021; Hartmann & Thiery, 2022; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). There is an increase in what David Landau refers to as ‘abusive constitutionalism’ – “the use of the mechanisms of constitutional change — a constitutional amendment and constitutional replacement — to undermine democracy” (Landau, 2013:191). The impunity and flagrancy of authoritarian rule might have reduced in the world. Nonetheless, the resurgence in military coups, authoritarian regimes’

adoption of constitutional change or abuse of the constitution to achieve political gains of an extended stay in office and undermine democracy remains a point of concern (Zamfir, 2021).

More so, it is now conventional to find supposed democratic governments combining elements of authoritarian rule to engender a competitive authoritarian, electoral autocracy or hybrid regime (Landau, 2013). This is the case in many African states where constitutions have been reworked to appear democratic and give legitimacy to the government, but are largely anti-democratic. For context, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt crafted a constitution that made Egypt a competitive authoritarian government where elections do not guarantee a change of regime. In Tunisia, despite building an assuring democracy, the country was plunged into a partly free democratic status in 2021 when President Kaïs Saïed suspended the parliament, dismissed parts of the constitution and began to rule by decree and new judicial powers (Hartmann & Thiery, 2022; Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). Yet again, in 2022 when the suspended parliament gathered online to repeal the enormous powers of the president, Kaïs Saïed – a former professor of law – in what he labelled an “unprecedented failed coup attempt” dissolved the parliament on March 30 2022 having accused the parliament of “conspiring against state security” (Deutsche Welle, 2022).

Siegle & Cook (2021) observe that 16 heads of state have eliminated term limits in Africa. This include Conte (Guinea, 2001), Eyadema (Togo, 2002), Bongo (Gabon, 2003), Museveni (Uganda, 2005), Deby (Chad, 2005), Biya (Cameroon, 2008), Bouteflika (Algeria, 2008), Guelleh (Djibouti, 2010), Nkurunziza (Burundi, 2015), Kagame (Rwanda, 2015), Nguesso (Republic of the Congo, 2015), Kiir (South Sudan, 2015), Kabila (DRC, 2016), Azali (Comoros, 2018), Sisi (Egypt, 2019) and Ouattara (Cote d’Ivoire, 2020). Whereas 8 countries (Eswatini, Morocco, Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, Lesotho and The Gambia) are without constitutional term limits. This constitutes a bane to good governance and increases the chances of corruption on the continent.

Related to this is the problem of sit-tightism which produces long-term serving presidents. This is prevalent in Africa with some rulers staying as long as 43 years in office. This, according to Reuters (2021) includes Teodoro Obiang of Equatorial Guinea who has spent about 43 years in office; Paul Biya (Cameroon; 39 years), Denis Sassou Nguesso (Congo Republic; 38 years); Yoweri Museveni (Uganda; 36 years), King Mswati III (eSwatini; 36 years); Idriss Deby (Chad; 31 years); Isaias Afwerki (Eritrea; 28 years); Ismail Omar Guelleh (Djibouti; 22 years); King Mohammed VI (Morocco; 22 years); and Paul Kagame (Rwanda; 22 years). Meanwhile, in some of these countries elections have never taken place while in others it



is organized under an undemocratic atmosphere. However, the lack of term limits has resulted in 10 leaders (Paul Kagame, Ismail Omar Guelleh, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, King Mohammed VI, Isaias Afwerki, Teodore Obiang, Paul Biya, Idriss Deby, King Mswati III and Yoweri Museveni) ruling for 20 years and two family dynasties (Bongo and Gnassingbe) staying in power for over 50 years (Siegle & Cook, 2021).

### MILITARY COUP

Military coup remains an existential threat to the growth of democracy in the world. For example, in Latin America, all the countries (except two) were under military rule between the 1960s and 1970s (Landau, 2013). In West Africa, the democratic gains recorded have been short-lived and were greatly reversed in 2021. Military coups have recently returned to Africa indicating an era of coup culture. The year 2021 witnessed more coups than the last 10 years. Starting from Myanmar where the military claimed that credible elections held in November 2020 were fraudulent, the military coup quickly spread to Sudan where the military took over power in 2021, declared a state of emergency and hinted that elections will not hold until 2023. Meanwhile, in Chad, the military took over in April 2021 following the death of Idriss Déby (Repucci & Slipowitz, 2022). Also in Niger, there was an attempted coup in March 2021 (Zamfir, 2021). Whereas in Mali, two coups were recorded in 10 months. The president and prime minister of an interim government appointed by ECOWAS were removed less than a year after toppling the government of Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Col. Assimi Goïta, who orchestrated both coups, installed himself as president of the transition government (Gyimah-Boadi, 2021). There were also coups in Sudan and Guinea informing the fear of the re-introduction of a coup wave in the region (EIU, 2022). Burkina Faso on the other hand recorded two military coups in 2022 (February and September) (Africa News, 2022).

### DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

The role of the internet in the democratization process is undeniable. This is evident in the role social media played in political protests in the United States during the #BlackLivesMatter protest, #Istandwithhongkong, #OWS, #Zimbabwe and more recently, #Endsars protests in Nigeria when the youths protested police brutality and bad governance in the country (Akinyetun, 2021). No doubt, digital tools are indispensable in advancing political discussions, electioneering, civic engagement, activism and political participation. There are recent concerns about the government's use of digital tools to promote digital authoritarianism (Zamfir, 2021). This has

been explained away as a means of curbing the prevalence of hate speech, fake news, rumour, polarization and violence.

As a means of spreading autocracy and undermining democracy, the government often suppresses the media (online and offline) and deploys digital tools to spread disinformation and polarization among political opponents (Alizada et al, 2021). There is growing evidence that the government is using digital tools for censorship and surveillance. According to Gyimah-Boadi (2021), the governments of Nigeria, Benin and Ghana are complicit in this. The Beninese government was accused of using spyware to monitor Ignace Soussou, a journalist deemed antagonistic to the president. In Ghana, 3 former senior government officials were sentenced for purchasing Pegasus, Israeli spyware which is used to clandestinely control a phone's microphone and camera. Meanwhile in Nigeria, the government was accused of using spyware to penetrate and destabilize #EndSARS protest organizers.

Authoritarian governments have accelerated their efforts to regulate social media in recent years. The past years have seen an increase in internet shutdowns, especially during protests and elections. Gabon, Uganda, the Republic of Congo, Burundi and Chad are key players in internet shutdown in Africa. For instance, the longest social media blockage in Africa which spanned 16 months was recorded in Chad while in Uganda and the Republic of Congo, the government shut down social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter) and the internet ahead of the elections in January and March 2021 respectively. More so, states in Africa have adopted sophisticated means of stifling opposition and media freedom through social media tax (Uganda), license for content creators (Tanzania) and legislations that criminalize government criticism (Zimbabwe, Uganda, Tanzania and Egypt) (Cheeseman, 2018; Zamfir, 2021). In Nigeria, President Muhammadu Buhari banned Twitter for over 200 days from June 1 2021, for deleting his tweet about the country's civil war in 1967. The ban, in addition to indicating the rise of digital authoritarianism in the country, is an impediment to free speech, internet freedom and human rights in the country (Anyim, 2021).

## DRIVERS OF DEMOCRATIC DECLINE IN AFRICA

Having assessed the indicators of democratic decline in Africa, this section presents an overview of the factors that enable the incidence of relapse such as governance, state capture and corruption, insecurity and economic performance. The selection of these factors is due to their particular role in driving democratic decline in Africa. As argued in this section, governance is a key element of democratic growth, thus its corrosion weakens democratic growth. More so, because many African states are enmeshed

in corruption while state capture remain a dominant feature, transparency and inclusion – another requisite for democratic growth – are elusive. This creates an ambience of grievances that non-state actors capitalize on to promote insecurity. The section also appraises how bad economic performance in Africa exacerbates the incidence of poverty, youth unemployment, marginalization, debt crisis, deprivation, inequality and social exclusion – all of which strains democratic growth.

### GOVERNANCE

The quality of governance in Africa has experienced a significant decline in recent times. According to the Ibrahim Index of African Governance (2020), Africa recorded a decline in overall governance (-0.9) in 2020 whereby 13 countries experienced increasing deterioration and Libya (-5.5) was the most declining country within the specified period. The deterioration of governance in Africa is attributable to political instability, corruption, conflict, lack of integration and weak state legitimacy (Cheeseman, 2018). Whereas governance is a requisite for democratic growth and citizens to play an active role in the democratic process, they require a politically stable society that guarantees their rights, allows for participation and emphasizes inclusiveness.

### STATE CAPTURE AND CORRUPTION

The taking over of state institutions by economic and political actors to further their interests and their prebendal predilection is known as state capture. In such a state, the government's ability to represent societal interest is subverted and democracy is weakened. It is defined by Fukuyama (2014:54) as "the capture of ostensibly impersonal state institutions by powerful elites". Mbaku (2018) describes it as a critical form of grand corruption. Meanwhile, Karolewski (2021) identifies two categories of state capture depending on the level of dominance. The dominance of government agencies and party structure to further partisan gain is referred to as party state capture, while the control of public power for private gain is known as corporate state capture. Meanwhile, three key characteristics of state capture have been identified in the literature (Hall, 2012). These include systematic networks and individual involvement, privatization and outsourcing of government projects to cronies, and corrupt practices of multinational companies.

A captured state exclusively protects private interests while the state abandons its service delivery functions. This increases government impunity and abuse of power. It also encourages corruption by enabling actors to maximize their interests at the expense of society as found in Africa.

Nigeria presents an example of a foremost African country fraught with state capture and corruption. According to Transparency International (2022), Nigeria scores 24/100 and ranks 154 out of 180 countries on the Corruption Perception Index 2021. Their report shows that Nigeria has recorded a continuous decline in the index since 2017. Governance in Nigeria is impaired by corruption and the kleptocratic capture of local governments by state governors, legislators and elites. The third tier of government has been reduced to a funnel for syphoning funds and promoting corrupt practices such as embezzlement, kickbacks, bribery and contract fraud. These have fueled the stifling of democratic practices, exclusion, limited citizen participation and holding of sham elections (Page & Wando, 2022). The inequitable distribution of state resources, deterioration of public services, rentierism and political corruption is prevalent at all levels (federal, state and local) and sectors (public and private) of the Nigerian economy. Daunting examples of state capture in Nigeria include Babachir Lawal, the former secretary to the Federal Government of Nigeria, accused of diverting government contracts worth millions of dollars; Diezani Alison Madueke, former Nigerian petroleum minister, accused of looting an estimated \$1.7 billion; and Jonah Jang, former governor of Plateau state, accused of looting about \$16 million during his administration (Prusa, 2021).

Meanwhile, this trend pervades Africa. According to Gyimah-Boadi (2021:11), “the scramble for power among the country’s elite essentially eliminated the voice of the people in the governance of the country and left the state and economy at the mercy of leaders enjoying unfettered impunity”. This was the case in DR Congo where the state failed to provide its citizens with basic services but provided the opportunity for private businesses and foreign multinational companies through natural resources extraction. Meanwhile, in Guinea, mining investors captured the state and pay bribes to the country in exchange for access to natural resources (Mbaku, 2018). South Africa is another example of a captured state where the Gupta brothers – President Zuma’s friends – wield enormous influence that includes appointing and sacking ministers and senior government officials (Dassah, 2018). Dassah (2018) notes that the Gupta brothers claimed to be in control of coal supplies to Eskom; the power utility. They were also responsible for the dismissal of Nhlanhla Nene, the Finance Minister in 2015 and his replacement by Des van Rooyen. The point being made here is clear. A captured state features parasitic individuals and multinational companies who plunder the resources of the state for personal gain and make development or service delivery difficult. As such, corruption becomes the order of the day, while governance, transpar-

ency and inclusion become distant. These engender democratic deterioration as captors more often than not distort laws, regulations and government policy for private gain.

### INSECURITY

West Africa is no doubt troubled by fragility, conflicts and violence perpetuated by violent extremists, insurgent groups, terrorist groups, militant pastoralists and violent non-state actors – among others. Insecurity poses a threat to governance and by extension democratic growth. As Zamfir (2021) puts it, conflict-ridden countries such as Mali, the Central African Republic and Somalia are confronted with complex situations that make development impossible. More so, Nigeria's role as a power broker in West Africa has been hindered by incessant insecurity perpetrated by Boko Haram insurgents, bandits, unknown gunmen, secessionists, militants and militant herders. Indeed, the country has become a source of instability to its neighbouring countries (EIU, 2022).

### ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

Another factor enabling democratic recession in Africa is poor economic performance, or as Cheeseman (2018) put it, a stalled economic transformation. Although the global economy is challenged by the economic impact of the COVID-19 crisis and lingering Russia-Ukraine conflict, it is particularly debilitating for African states with hitherto rising cases of poverty, unemployment, inequality, social exclusion and debt crisis. According to African Development Bank (2022), the debt crisis in Africa is worsened by increased government spending, high inflation, weak public finance management and security spending. This is further compounded by the Russian-Ukraine conflict which increased commodity and energy prices thus complicating the poverty impasse in Africa. In addition to the 28.7 million Africans pushed into extreme poverty in 2021, it is estimated that an additional 1.8 million people will become extremely poor by the end of 2022 and 2.1 million in 2023 as a result of the conflict and its spill-over effect in contracting African economies. For context, the three largest economies in Africa; Nigeria, Egypt and South Africa, have witnessed significant economic declines in 2022 as a result of underinvestment, debt crisis, insecurity and food insecurity – thus increasing the incidence of hunger and extreme poverty on the continent (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2022).

The prevalence of hunger and extreme poverty have been linked to the rise in extremism, religious fundamentalism, insurgency, youth unrest and demonstrations. The resulting clampdown on protesters and agitators

has exacerbated the risks of authoritarian rule. Autocratic leaders have used such pretexts to enforce draconian rules and maintain their stranglehold on the economy. This is because “economic crises offer situational incentives to institutionalize defects in an unconsolidated democracy” (Merkel, 2004:53). Indeed, protracted economic performance reinforces conflict and increases the chances of uprisings, especially in states with resource curse (Ncube & Jones, 2013). The phenomenon of resource curse is an overly explored narrative in the literature. It presupposes that states rich in natural resources such as oil, diamond and gold as in Africa, have been unable to utilize such resources for development, rather it leads to corruption and the struggle for rents by the government, elite and political contenders through violence. To be sure, resource-related conflicts are common in resource-rich countries. For instance, rebel groups in Sierra Leone, DR Congo and Angola are notable for using revenue from diamonds to finance civil war. The scramble for the control of natural resources has led to protests, battles and riots in Libya, Somalia, DR Congo, South Sudan, Sudan and Nigeria. Indeed, Nigeria and Sudan have higher incidences of resource-related conflicts. Given that both countries are oil-rich, most of the resource-related conflicts in these countries have been about the control of oil resulting in direct conflicts, kidnapping of oil workers and hostage-taking. Meanwhile, in DR Congo and Somalia, battles between the government, rebel forces and militias for control of mining (diamond and cobalt) and access to resources (land and water) have been observed (Kishi, 2014). Meanwhile, negative economic growth triggers disenchantment with democracy and increases the chances of democratic backsliding (Silva-Leander, 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Democracy is rooted in the principles of rule of law, free and fair elections, state legitimacy, minority rights, fundamental human rights and press freedom. By embracing democracy, African states became poised to adopt these principles against their hitherto repressive political inclinations. However, still largely characterized by cult personality, party control, authoritarian rule and sit-tight syndrome, leaders began to combine elements of democracy and authoritarianism to form a competitive authoritarian, hybrid regime or electoral autocracy. In such systems, elements of democracy such as elections, opposition and competition are allowed to avoid sanctions from the international community. However, electoral fraud, harassment, patronage, the control of media and violence were sustained as systemic ways of frustrating change of regime and perpetuating the incumbent in power. Although democratic relapse is a global phenomenon as evident in the number of countries that slipped from

the democratic curve in 2021; outnumbering countries with democratic gains on a 16-year track. Nonetheless, the highest incidence of autocratization is found in Africa due to the prevalence of abuse of power, limited freedom, restriction of civil rights and curtailing of the rule of law. Among the factors necessitating democratic relapse and autocratization in Africa are a weak democracy, weak political institutionalization, poor economic growth, corruption, electoral fraud, abuse of power, lack of confidence in electoral bodies and electoral violence – *inter alia*.

As argued in the paper, the indicators of democratic relapse include electoral violence – where elections are plagued by enmity, rigging, ballot box snatching, violence and destruction of life and property as prevalent in Nigeria; third termism and constitutional coup – where leaders amend the constitution to allow for a third term or abuse the constitution to ensure an extended stay in office as in Togo, Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda; military coup – the taking over of government by the military as recently experienced in Sudan, Guinea, Niger and Chad; and digital authoritarianism – the suppression of free speech through censorship, surveillance, internet shutdowns, social media blockage and social media tax as found in Chad, Gabon, Uganda, Congo, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. Meanwhile, the enabling factors of democratic relapse are poor governance – a decline in the quality of participation, rights, and inclusion; state capture – the taking over of government institutions by private individuals or groups for private gain; insecurity – the proliferation of conflicts and violence perpetrated by armed non-state actors; and poor economic performance. It is noteworthy that the interplay of these varying factors reverses the democratic gains recorded in Africa and threatens to suspend the continent in a state of deepened autocratization. It also risks increasing the chances of human rights violations, abuse of power, and distortion of national politics.

Given the findings of this article, the following recommendations are proffered as best practices expected of African leaders. There can be no meaningful development or democratic sustenance in a society devoid of citizen participation, rights and inclusion in the decision-making process of the political system. It is on this premise that good governance becomes imperative for reversing the growing trend of democratic relapse in Africa. The practice of governance must espouse the rule of law, citizen participation, rights and inclusion while the instrument of legality and parliamentary control must be allowed to take its course. Credible, free and fair elections must be guaranteed while the results of such elections must be upheld. To achieve this, dire attention should be paid to strengthening state institutions such as the legislature and the judiciary rather than building cult personalities or promoting executive aggrandizement. These institutions should equally imbibe the culture of respecting consti-



tutional provisions for term limits whilst building state legitimacy through the reclamation of the state from cronyism.

Furthermore, due emphasis on tolerance for opposition rather than seeking to eliminate or stifle competition must be encouraged. A conducive space for participating actively in the decision-making process should be created for citizens. Such an inclusive and participatory role must be accompanied by freedom of speech (online and offline). It is also recommended that digital tools required for improving civic participation, capacity building and activism should be recognized and protected, especially through the guarantee of internet freedom. In addition, priority should be given to accountability by leaders through the elimination of corruption and the abuse of power. Finally, the African Union, must in strong terms and with the aid of sanctions; when necessary, condemn the rise in military takeovers in Africa.

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