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INAF 357: African Politics & Governments

Ghana and South Africa: A Tale of Different Democracies

The definition and measures of democracy are not easily and widely agreed upon, but certain characteristics are widely accepted. Fair multiparty elections with no suppression of the opposition and the two-turnover test (“when the winners of founding elections are defeated and peacefully hand over power in a subsequent election, and the new winners themselves later peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election”) arise as factors of consolidated democracies (Lecture, 9/27/18) (Cho & Logan 34). Democracy could also be “about winning and losing according to a set of rules,” implying agreed upon and peaceful alternations of power (Cho & Logan 38). When Africans are asked about the meaning of democracy, they most frequently cite “increases in civil liberties,” which factors into civil society actors. These definitions also serve as ways to evaluate democracy, by measuring the role and freedom of civil society actors, observing power alternations, and surveying citizen perception, all factors that democracy evaluators such as Freedom House use in their rankings (Lecture, 9/27/18).

While Ghana and South Africa have stronger democracies compared to many countries on the African continent, Ghana has proven to have a more legitimate and fair democracy. Compiling the various factors of democracy shows that Ghana’s prospects for democratic support from all citizens are stronger than South Africa’s democratic future. By examining the greater role of religious organizations and continued power alternations in Ghana, it becomes evident why Ghana is a multiparty democracy, while South Africa has become a one-party dominant state.

Religious organizations, such as the Christian Council of Ghana (CCG) and the South African Council of Churches (SACC), influence the democratic process and thus their level of influence determines the strength of democracy. Through the CCG's autonomous relationship with the state and position of partisan neutrality, along with a consequent moral authority and emphasis on the Christian impetus behind political involvement, "the CCG ... is by far the more influential political actor" compared to the SACC (Kuperus 30).

The clearest distinction between the CCG and the SACC involves political neutrality after the democratic transition. Kuperus states that the CCG "is regarded as an independent voice among civil-society actors, consistently urging the government toward just and fair public policy," highlighting that the CCG is a civil society actor that is not afraid of criticizing the government (35). This aspect is pertinent to the ability to promote democracy, especially when the government is attempting to undermine criticism. In contrast, "the ANC [insists] that civil-society actors play supportive but not watchdog roles in the public sphere," highlighting that the SACC is less likely to openly criticize the ANC government (Kuperus 41). The SACC's inability and refusal to play a watchdog role weakens their effect and commitment to democracy promotion.

Additionally, the SACC has become increasingly tied to the ANC; the SACC political framework is described as "critical solidarity," emphasizing unity with the ruling party, not neutrality. Kuperus claims that "the SACC ... has had a more difficult time presenting itself as an impartial, nonpartisan civil-society actor" because "quite a few prominent leaders ... left the SACC for government or public sector posts after 1994" (44). The SACC is too closely related to the ANC to remain an effective, independent civil society actor, which is demonstrated in citizen

perspectives. “A considerable overlap existed between the SACC and the government... [and] this reality, combined with the SACC’s position of critical solidarity, cemented the perspective in many people’s minds that the SACC had been coopted by the government” (Kuperus 44). This overlap not only allowed the ANC to strengthen their grip on power without check, but also undermined the SACC’s influence with South African citizens since the SACC seemed to be supporting the ANC and not an entirely pro-democracy agenda. Maintaining the relationship with the ANC has created a diminished influence of civil society actors in South Africa, contrary to the highly influential role of the CCG. A former CCG leader stated, “We are not here to do for a particular government or particular political party what they would want us to do,” allowing the CCG to more effectively interact with citizens regardless of political affiliation and support a true multiparty system since their motives are not tied to political gain. Thus, education programs and statements by the CCG are more effective and attractive to more citizens since “its nonpartisan stance has garnered widespread credibility and respect among Ghanaians, who feel that it speaks on their behalf, rather than that of the government” (Kuperus 35). Connected to the aspect of political neutrality is the moral authority that comes with standing by a religious mission and promoting democratic involvement as a Christian obligation; in this aspect as well, the CCG’s efforts far surpassed those of the SACC, solidifying CCG influence in Ghanaian politics and contributing to greater levels of democracy in the country.

The CCG influenced Christian voters by instilling a religious aspect into its politically neutral, pro-democracy programs. Additionally, the CCG engaged citizens more directly as it “replaced petitions and memos to government officials as its core political tactic with political education programs, which informed Ghanaians about the Christian call to political

involvement” (Kuperus 36). The combination of running pro-democracy workshops with a Christian influence along with the already established perception of political neutrality made such programs more effective at encouraging involvement and giving citizens a resource that supported their democratic desires, regardless of ideology. On the other hand, the SACC lost its moral imperative due to its political connections, making it less effective at appealing to a wide variety of citizens, and worsening perceptions of true democracy. Kuperus mentions that “the SACC’s efforts during the democratic transition ... involved civic education ... [but] discussions about Christian responsibilities regarding active engagement in politics were muted” (42). The lack of emphasizing Christian responsibilities led their pro-democracy message to be less effective, and as Vena Mqondisi said “we seem to have lost our prophetic voice,” since the SACC did not cater to the religious population as strongly, while the CCG used its role as a religious organization to tie its teachings to religion, having a greater impact (Kuperus 43).

The more visible factor regarding why Ghana is a more successful democracy than South Africa is power alternations. Since the early 1990s, Ghana has had multiple peaceful alternations of power between the NDC and the NPP, while in South Africa, “the ANC has garnered 60 percent or more of the vote in every national election since 1994” (Kuperus 34). Cho & Logan highlight the importance of power alternation and state, “ensuring that elections are truly competitive is one reason that periodic alternation among the holders of top political office is considered a cornerstone of democracy” (Cho & Logan 31). The two-turnover test, as discussed earlier, is one way of measuring democracy to determine if elections are truly fair (Lecture, 9/27/18). While the ANC may not explicitly rig elections, its continued dominance, even with some corruption and citizen disapproval, raises questions about the occurrence of quality,

competitive elections. Also, alternations contribute to a feeling of citizen connectedness.

“[Alternations] widen the pool of those who feel that they have a strong stake in the system, because opposition parties in the short term may nonetheless have hopes of becoming the ruling party in the future,” and, with greater prospects of coming to power, more citizens are likely to participate in the democracy. Also, alternations “remind power holders that they may actually be held accountable by voters for their actions and decisions, and could face real challenges to their hold on power if they do not satisfy public demands and expectations,” improving the quality of democracy (Cho & Logan 31). Ghana’s alternations in power prevent specific groups from feeling excluded from the system unlike in South Africa where “in a system with no alternations, losers may fear that their position is permanent and perceive that their society’s level of commitment to democratic rules is weak (Cho & Logan 45).

While strong civil society actors and alternations are some factors and indicators for democracy, asking citizens about their perceptions of democracy is the best way to gauge the direct human aspect (Lecture, 9/27/18). Afrobarometer surveys have found greater agreement about a strong democracy in Ghana than in South Africa with 36% of Ghanaians considering Ghana a full democracy, and only 15% of South Africans feeling the same about their country. Additionally, 79% of Ghanaians are at least fairly satisfied with their democracy, while only 42% of South Africans gave the same response about their democracy (Afrobarometer Ghana 2017/South Africa 2018). This multitude of factors and indicators demonstrates that South Africa is less of a democracy than many expect, certainly less democratic than Ghana, and that the two discussed factors *caused* the differing levels of democracy. Although Cho & Logan believe that South Africa’s “unique historical trajectory” dispels poor prospects for a future of strong

democracy, the aforementioned factors demonstrate that prospects for democracy in South Africa are somewhat slim, especially if citizens continue to become more dissatisfied and if the ANC continues to win elections by large margins and control governments that citizens do not feel connected to. On the contrary, Ghana's democratic prospects continue to soar, especially after another peaceful transition of power in the last election. These two countries prove that democracy is much more complex than merely holding elections, but rather a consenting relationship between each citizen and government that allows for unbiased civic education and peaceful changes in power.

Afrobarometer sources not from class

“Ghana Summary of Results (2017).” *Afrobarometer*, Afrobarometer, 2017,
afrobarometer.org/publications/ghana-summary-results-2017.

“South Africa Summary of Results (2018).” *Afrobarometer*, Afrobarometer, 2018,
afrobarometer.org/publications/south-africa-summary-results-2018.