

# Chapter 15

## The Challenge of Democratization in Africa: From Digital Democracy to Digital Authoritarianism

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The spread of democracy in Africa in the 1990s, often dubbed the third wave of democracy, was a period of democratic optimism on the continent. This revolution, which led to an increase in democratic activities, was given impetus by the fourth industrial revolution, occasioned by the internet to engender a digital democratic space characterized by increased political communication and easy access to information. Despite the optimism of liberation that digital democracy promises, it has been reversed by African leaders to promote authoritarianism: digital authoritarianism. Digital tools are increasingly being used to promote mass surveillance of citizens, internet shutdown, electoral manipulation, corporate espionage, censorship, etc. The chapter further posits that the incidence of digital authoritarianism pervades Africa and has been further entrenched by the incidence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which provided autocratic leaders with the opportunity to restrict expression and free speech with the pretext of combating disinformation and cybercrime.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The spread of democracy in Africa and the disenchantment with authoritarian rule in the 1990s and the beginning of the millennium marks a watershed in the history of many African states. As a result of the revolution, some leaders in Africa organized periodic elections and emphasized the guarantee of human

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rights to appear less autocratic. Many states adopted a pseudo-democratic model where the leader while encouraging sit-tightism and despotic tendencies, organized elections and allowed nominal citizens freedom to give legitimacy to the government and maintain a democratic outlook. Leaders like Paul Biya, Gnassingbe Eyadéma, and Daniel Arap Moi of Cameroon, Togo, and Kenya respectively, were able to hold and win multiparty elections despite the widespread criticisms of dictatorship that characterized their regimes. Nonetheless, the incursion of democratic principles around Africa continued unabated and has been bolstered by the proliferation of the internet and social media.

Meanwhile, the fourth industrial revolution occasioned by the internet increased the chances of political participation, civic engagement, activism, and citizens' involvement in decision-making by citizens around the world, including Africa. The digital revolution influenced democratic political behaviour among youths and political leaders. African leaders like Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria and Ian Khama of Botswana were able to use social media to their advantage by reaching millions of young people and amassing massive followership. Technology has been adapted in the Democratic Republic of Congo to grant access to citizens to budgetary proceedings while in Nigeria youths have used the internet to protest against police brutality and government negligence. As Gopaldas (2019) submits, the global relevance of social media to democracy cannot be undermined. It has significantly promoted a digital democratic space characterized by increased political communication, accountability, political engagement and criticism, easy access to information, swift connectivity of electorates and candidates, citizen-dominated political discussions, and improved service delivery.

However, despite the plenitude of advantages that digitization holds for political development and democratic consolidation in Africa, it has in recent times become a tool of oppression by the political elite to exploit the state for political gain and maintain its prebendal predilection. This trend is increasingly permeating the African political spectrum and promises an amplification of anti-democratic practices. This was alluded to by Gopaldas (2019) that even though networks like Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp have been used to secure election victories, they have also been accused of being a threat to democracy. Facebook has been alleged of misusing data following the Cambridge Analytica scandal. More so, these platforms are unregulated and therefore easily manipulated to spread fake news, disinformation, incite violence, and promote digital authoritarianism.

Lamensch (2021) opines that the interconnected nature of the internet has made digital authoritarianism a transnational repression tactic adopted by governments to attack the citizens, journalists, human rights activists, and the opposition. In a flagrant disrespect for human rights, the tactic has been used in combination with indiscriminate arrests and extralegal killings. Given this, Yayboke and Brannen (2020) aver that digital authoritarianism is inimical to democracy and the guarantee of free speech. To this end, the internet presents dual options, for good and evil. It can be used to promote or mar an electioneering process, it can be fragmented to provide a fertile ground for authoritarianism while it can also be used to dictate the flow of information or utterly suppress the rights of citizens. In the words of Gopaldas (2019), the claim of combating fake news has become a front for governments to shut down the internet and maintain close control over citizens.

Although extensive research has been done on democracy and democratization as well as social media and democracy in Africa, little attention has however been paid to digital democracy and digital authoritarianism. This paper fills this significant gap by expounding on digital democracy as a phase in the democratization process. It contributes to the literature on digital authoritarianism and examines the challenges faced by Africans in the quest for a consolidated digital democratic space and the encroachment on human rights and free speech. The paper identifies the factors that give impetus to

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