

Understanding Intra-party Democracy in Africa: Issues and Questions

By Augustine Titani Magolowondo*

Abstract

Political parties have a fundamental and indispensable role in contemporary democracies. There are, however, a number of 'institutional guarantees' that parties would have to fulfil if they were to effectively meet what is expected of them in a democracy. One of such institutional requirements is intra-party democracy. If parties are building blocks of democracy, they cannot afford not to be democratic themselves for to do so is a contradiction both in terms and in values. This very important institutional dimension is, however, lacking in many parties, particularly in emerging democracies. As such, any initiative to address this democratic deficit is both noble and pertinent. However, in Africa, there is need for a more holistic approach in the way intra-party democracy is to be addressed for there are a number of other considerations that have to be made in order to either better understand the scope of the problem or to deal with it. The call for this holistic approach arises from the state and context within which these parties find themselves. Contextual sensitivity is supreme.

Introduction

Although conceptually speaking, democracy continues to belong to the category of 'essentially contested concepts', in modern times, it is futile to labour oneself in defining this form of governance in the sense of the classical, Athenian concept which centred on direct democracy. The complexities of modern societies have made this (direct democracy) unattainable. Even Mwalimu Julius Nyerere's African deliberative democracy, -that of under the tree, where *people talk and talk until they reach a consensus*, (Erdmann, 2000) is not feasible as there is no single tree under which the entire population of a given country could sit. Modern democracy, as Samuel Huntington observes, "is not simply democracy of the village, the tribe, or the city-state; it is democracy of the nation-state and its emergence is associated with the development of the nation-state" (Huntington, 1991:13). Thus, no matter how one defines today's democracy, one thing is clear: such a democracy will not be direct, but rather representative. As such, a contemporary democratic system requires intermediary actors between state and society as well as institutional mechanisms for the articulation and advocacy of diverse views and policy preferences. While civil society organisations have for some time claimed to be the rightful and legitimate 'middlemen,' it is now becoming axiomatic that in essence, political parties have a fundamental and indispensable niche in contemporary democracies. Indeed, "So fundamental are political parties to the operation of modern politics that their role and significance are often taken for granted" (Heywood, 2002:73). As a matter of fact, today's democracy is inconceivable without political parties hence we talk of 'multiparty democracy'.

To be sure, the borderlines between political parties and other interest groups may in some instances be blurred if not conflated. However, what distinguishes political parties from any other political interest group is that it is only the former whose primary goal is that of contesting and capturing state power through peaceful means (Matlosa, 2007). It is also this very distinctive feature of political parties that makes them important institutions to reckon with in any democratic society. Because of what they are or what they are meant to be, they become the main vehicle for political representation, the main mechanism for the organization of government and the channels for maintaining democratic accountability.

There are, however, a number of 'institutional guarantees' that these organised groups called political parties would have to fulfil if they were to effectively meet what is expected of them in a democracy. The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD) identifies five of such requirements. They include a) organisational strength, b) political identity, c) internal unity, d) electioneering capacity and e) internal democracy (NIMD, 2004). Thus, NIMD presents us with a 'catalogue' from which those interested in aiding the institutional development of political parties would have to choose.

In emerging democracies, it may be relatively easy to identify and agree on these institutional preconditions. The problem is to assess the extent of their presence or absence in each of the political parties one is confronted with for doing so calls for development of measurable indicators. The difficulty creeps in particularly because the aforementioned institutional guarantees touch on the internal workings of political parties. In Africa, political parties are unfortunately the kind of institutions that have been subjected to far much less research in the democratisation field as it is only recently that they have started become subjects of public discussion and explicit external support. As such, we lack comprehensive knowledge on what would constitute key dimensions of these institutional underpinnings. For this reason, any attempt that seeks to contribute to the deepening of any of these basic requirements would have to be premised on a fair understanding of the political parties themselves. In other words, we need to understand the nature of these political parties and the context within which they find themselves as a starting point. Doing so, it is argued here, will guide us in terms of the kind of questions we would have to ask if we were to assess any of these institutional requirements with the view of addressing the gaps that may exist.

Against this background, this paper intends to shed some light on the question of intra-party democracy by raising some of the pertinent issues and question that would have to be taken into consideration by those who intend to make a difference either through research or institutional development support. Following this introduction is a brief discussion on the concept of intra-party democracy and some of its key variables. Thereafter, we recapitulate on the debate on the state of affairs of political parties especially in Africa. Given the realities that confront political parties in this sub region, we then address the question of what it means for internal party democracy and what considerations

we would have to make if we were to better understand this aspect of institutional development of political parties and/or address the bottlenecks.

On the question of internal party democracy

Intra-party democracy is simply democracy within the party. What this means is that we can possibly better understand what intra-party democracy is, or what it entails if we were to explicate the term 'democracy' as it is commonly applied in contemporary literature. In our case, we can draw insights from Robert Dahl (1971) who views democracy¹ as a political system in which those who govern are continuously responsive to the preferences and aspirations of those who are governed. Of course, Dahl is mainly concerned with democracy in a society as a whole. However, his definition of democracy is still applicable to aiding our understanding of intra-party democracy particularly if we were to consider that the party leadership or executive is in a way analogous of government while the rank and file are an approximation of the citizens or the electorate. According to Dahl for a system to be qualified as a democracy, it would have to fulfill three fundamental conditions: Citizens should be able to formulate their preferences, express those preferences among themselves and also to the government, either as individuals or in groups, and those preferences have to be "weighed" equally "in the conduct of government" (Dahl, 1971:2).

Thus, to talk about internal party democracy is to refer to the extent to which a party subscribes to and abides by the basic and universal democratic tenets. Consistent with our conceptual framework, it means we are concerned for instance with the extent to which a political party has put in place and follows mechanisms that allow for the party executive to be responsive and accountable to its membership. It also means that in such a party, there is internal political contestation or competition and participation of the members in the affairs of the party. In addition, a democratic political party, like a democratic polity, should be able to be tolerant to and accommodative of divergent views within it. Thus, party discipline would not necessarily mean absence of what Scarrow (2005) calls an organized factionalism.

In our attempt to understand or appraise intra-party democracy, the task then becomes that of identifying the kind of mechanisms that could be put in place if a party was to be regarded as internally democratic. In other words, we would now have to enter the controversial and hardly uncharted political terrain of developing objective and universally agreed upon indicators for democracy within the parties. This is not particularly the core business of this paper. For purposes of our discussion, it suffices to take recourse to the four indicators that

¹ Robert Dahl however prefers to use the term "polyarchy" to democracy, in an attempt to make a distinction between the ideal (democracy) and what in practice exists (polyarchy). In the long run, the more a polyarchy will satisfy the necessary conditions, the more it will approximate the ideal cum democracy. See Dahl, Robert (1971): *Polyarchy, Participation and Opposition*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

NIMD (2004) puts forward as a guide to assess the extent of internal party democracy:

- a) Is the party functioning according to established rules and procedures?
- b) Is decision making democratic and based on party statutes and current laws?
- c) Is there meaningful decentralization of the party's economic resources?
- d) Can the rank-and-file (the ordinary member of the party at the lowest level in the party hierarchy) exercise oversight over the party leadership?

As a caveat, it should be pointed out here that our making reference to these four indicators is not an admission that these are comprehensive. Neither should it be construed to mean that we are in total agreement that these are the key indicators. To the contrary and as already alluded to, development of indicators for the institutional development of political parties is at the moment work in progress. We only use the four indicators to highlight the kind of challenges we face and questions we have to consider when we try to assess internal democracy particularly in Africa, and this is what is within the purview of this paper. To better appreciate these challenges, we need to first recap on the state of political parties in this region.

The state of political parties in Africa

Political parties that existed prior to independence were largely National Liberation Movements (NLM) that drew their legitimacy and support on the quest for independence (Suttner, 2004). For them, nationalism was the ideological drive that gave them the political impetus and for that reason, they often enjoyed nationwide trust of the people they represented.

The situation has, however, changed. As acknowledged in Conference Statement of the recently held international conference on 'Sustaining Africa's Democratic Momentum' in Johannesburg (05-07 March 2007), there is now a 'crisis of trust in political parties' which must be 'reversed'. There are a multitude of reasons why this is the case (cf. Salih, 2007, Erdmann, 2005). As we will shortly discuss, some of these reasons have an implication on our quest to understand or improve on intra-party democracy.

Generally, many political parties in the emerging democracies in Africa today lack strong ideological or programmatic foundations. Many are founded and heavily financed by an individual or group of individuals with the primary if not the only motive to capture power. Unfortunately, they have often shown that this capturing of state power and authority is largely to control state resources for their own benefits (Salih, 2007). These founders and/or financiers wield enormous political power that is further entrenched by clientism and patronage tendencies. In worst case scenarios, some parties are run as if they were personal fiefdoms and are devoid of anything that is akin to a membership based organization, as a political party is supposed to be. Thus, in terms of models of party organization, many of African political parties would fall in Scarrow's

categories of *leader-dominated parties* and *parties of the notables* (Scarrow, 2005).

Furthermore, while parties have supporters, it is difficult to identify actual party members beyond those who hold positions. In Malawi, after the reintroduction of multiparty politics in 1993, no political party has party cards on the grounds that during the one party era, these cards were an instrument of exploitation and oppression as they were forcibly sold. As such there is completely no way that one could tell who a party member is. Some parties have tried to distribute T-shirts and party cloths, but in poverty stricken countries, who would refuse to have a free or highly subsidized cloth. In some countries like Tanzania and Kenya, political parties do have party cards that are sold or given to their members. However, there are no mechanisms that would check duo or multiple membership. As a matter of fact, therefore, data on membership hardly exists in many instances or, where it exists, it is not as reliable. It is, therefore, not surprising that in a survey on political parties in Malawi in 1998, the cumulative number of members that all political parties claimed to have was at 18,000,000 when the population in Malawi at that time was around 9,000,000 (Kadzamira, et al, 1999).

In addition, most of the emerging democracies have very weak legal instruments governing the operations of political parties. For instance, political parties in Zambia are registered under the Societies Act that is ideally meant to govern operations of clubs and societies. The same is the case in Kenya, although there is now a draft bill on political parties. The Malawian Political Parties Registration and Regulations Act is more of a law that deals with registration than regulation of parties. The absence of an effective legal framework governing political parties implies that there are no safeguards that would ensure that parties abide by what they profess.

What then does this state of political parties mean for those interested in researching on or supporting internal party democracy? This is an open question that calls for more debate. What is offered hereunder is just the starting point.

The state of political parties and intra-party democracy

The nature of political parties in Africa and the context within which they operate imply that we will have to take into account a number of other equally important factors if we are to assess or try to improve on intra-party democracy. For instance, it is obvious that political parties in Africa, like their counterparts in established democracies have established rules and procedures in form of party constitutions, manifestos and other important party documents. However, given the context within which they operate, in which informal relations and patronage networks play a very important role, those interested in understanding intra-party democracy in particular and internal dynamics of political parties in general would have to pay special attention to the informal and unwritten rules and traditions for it is these that would provide us with a fair picture. In other words, what is written may not be what is done or indeed what is important. The challenge here is that of getting to know that which is not written

but yet is critical to the operations of the party. In more concrete terms, it means that one would have to become an insider of the system to have a better picture of how things work. Snapshot and/or quantitative surveys like those done by Afro-Barometer, World Governance Assessment (WGA) or Freedom House may only succeed in looking at the formalisms, but this not enough. What we may need in this case are more social anthropological and qualitative based approaches like those employed by International IDEA (in their State of Democracy Project).

Similarly, to consider inclusiveness as a measure of participation of the rank and file in party affairs is to assume that we are able to identify those party members and their motives in the first place. In both instances, we face problems that we need to reckon with. As we have just noted, rarely would we find political parties with robust and highly institutionalized records of party members. The question then is who would be the addressee of questions related to inclusiveness.

Motives of party membership may also have an impact on the extent to which a party may be seen to be inclusive or not. Where individuals view parties as just a source of personal aggrandizement as is the case in many political parties in emerging democracies, political activism dwindles with the decrease in the likelihood that the party or party leadership will be able to provide the kind of material benefits that were expected. This is why the trend in crossing of the floor, a phenomenon that has become a thorn in the flesh of African democracies, is always from opposition parties to the ruling parties for it is the latter that enjoy a comparative advantage in the extent to which they can offer some 'dividends' to their members. In this regard, some party members may not actively participate in party affairs not necessarily because there are no mechanisms to facilitate their participation. Rather, they may have given up simply because for them, it is like the cow is no longer producing milk.

Furthermore, in some cases, lack of participation of certain groups like women in party affairs may not necessarily be an indication of an exclusive and hence internally not democratic party. It may actually be a reflection of cultural problem whereby in some cultural setups, women are generally discouraged to take up prominent roles in public life. Thus, just insisting on inclusion of women in political process without paying regard to the cultural dimension may therefore result in arriving at wrong conclusions.

Challenges also arise in situations where political parties revolve around dominant personalities who are either founders or financiers or both. In this case, it may be difficult to conceive of a possibility of the followers to demand accountabilities of such leaders. After all, these leaders are seen as the patrons of their followers for the latter depend on the former for favours or even the actual sustenance of the party itself. In other words, such 'parties' do not have members. Rather, they have 'subjects' and it is erroneous in the first place to expect subjects to demand accountability of their 'masters'. What is at stake in this case is not just the question of intra-party democracy but the very conceptual foundations of a party itself for unless the subjects turn into members

and the masters become democratically elected leaders, that which exists may not qualify to be called a political party. In other words, the nomenclature would have to change and we may not have to talk about intra-party democracy for it is like looking for internal democracy in an absolute monarchy. From a practical standpoint, therefore, we would sequentially have to reform the absolute monarchy into a democracy (constitutional monarchy) in the first place so that we can then assess the progress being made in the internal democratization process.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that democracy within the parties is important. If parties are building blocks of democracy, they cannot afford not to be democratic themselves for to do is a contradiction both in terms and in values. Much as this is the case, the foregoing discussion demonstrates that for those that are concerned with this subject matter, proceeding with caution and a great deal of sensitivity is the virtue. As we have noted, there are other important factors that we would have to deal with on the way. As democracy itself is just emerging, so too are many of the political parties. At their foundational stages, some of the parties may bear undemocratic traits like revolving around personalities or not having elected leadership. Such parties may become victims and not beneficiaries of political reforms that aim at creating conditions necessary for intra-party democracy if we do not have a holistic picture of issues at stake. Probably the most profound message that can be put across here is that of knowing the condition and context of the patient so that one knows where to start from. This is particularly because although the diagnosis may show that intra-party democracy is the critical ailment, we may have to pay attention to and even start with treatment of other related illnesses before we come to the core of our problem: intra-party democracy.

*Augustine Titani Magolowondo is a Programme Consultant for Eastern and Southern Africa Programme (ESARP) of the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy (NIMD). He holds a PhD in Political Science. While this paper has greatly benefited from the experiences accumulated in the course of his work, the paper does not in any way reflect the position or views of NIMD.

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