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Democratic practice in Mali: between conceptual ambiguity and cultural inflexibility

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Abstract:

After thirty years of democratic practices, Mali currently finds itself at a crossroads after having been the victim of three coups d'état. So, to analyze this thorny issue, we start from the observation that either the Malian democracy so praised by the world was chronically suffering from a malaise, or that the imported and imposed democratic model in Mali was not in line with its cultural values. This article attempts to address these various concerns through a critical and contextual approach.

Keywords: democracy, culture, politics, governance

Introduction

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 caused a geopolitical upheaval of global balances (the end of communism in Eastern Europe, the reunification of Germany, the disintegration of the former Soviet Union...). In Africa, it was practically the end of socialism supported by the former GDR of East Germany and the former Soviet Union in several African countries, in a context marked by the conditioning of French aid, the former colonial power, to the advent of democracy in Francophone African countries during the La Baule conference held on June

20, 1990, where French President François Mitterrand was uncompromising on the issue in the presence of thirty-seven (37) African countries. Thus, several African countries decided to inaugurate what Huntington called "the wave of democratization." From there, it is almost impossible to dismiss the hypothesis that most African countries accepted democracy to gain Western support through a kind of political conformism that was in vogue at the time, thus arguing for a political alternation at the top of the states in a context marked by the impoverishment of the population, unemployment, famine...

In Mali, democracy was acquired at the cost of the blood of martyrs, through a popular revolution that ended two decades of military dictatorship under the rule of General Moussa Traoré.

The advent of democracy had sparked a new hope among the Malian population, aspiring for a change in the system of governance and more freedom, even though they were not fully aware of its implications. Meanwhile, a segment of the population remained skeptical about the compatibility of Malian endogenous cultural values (the sacrality of power, the sidelining of certain social classes to govern the people, the absence of socially reliable criteria to be a candidate for elective positions, etc.) with certain democratic principles

(freedom of expression, equality for all in civil and political rights, etc.).

By analyzing democracy from this angle, one realizes that its practice in a country like Mali, proud of its customs and traditions, attached to monotheistic spiritual and cult values (Islam and Christianity), remains an equation that the average person would not find difficult to solve.

Moreover, the very concept of "democracy" remains very vague and biased in Malian vernacular languages, as democracy as defined by Westerners would be "the power of the people, by the people, and for the people." However, the first precursors of democracy in Mali idiomatically translated it as "the power of everyone," in Bambara "bè jè fanga," or even "consensual power." None of these definitional attempts at democracy fit the Malian context. Therefore, it is urgent to note that its advent in Mali oscillates between dissatisfaction and uncertainty.

In a democracy, power belongs to the people; it is the people who make the king. In the Malian context, it is a glaring truism that this assertion remains a utopia to the extent that the people not only ignore their role in this process, but also those who seek elective positions, in most cases, work for their own interest at the expense of the people's interest. Today, after thirty years of democratic practice, the observation is not very encouraging. This issue could find its foundation in several factors, notably in the poor application of the sacred principles of democracy (citizen participation, equality before the law, respect for fundamental rights, freedom of expression, separation of powers, sovereignty of the people). On the other hand, democracy has encountered socio-cultural relativism where political mimicry appears as a rather ineffective political recipe in the Malian context. In order to better understand our approach, it is imperative to address the following central question:

How can we explain the existential dichotomy between European democracy and the socio-cultural realities of Mali? The answer to this question undoubtedly leads us to first develop that democracy as understood by Mali in its endogenous state is in contradiction with that conveyed by the West (I) before addressing the issue alluding to the elasticity of the concept of democracy in the Malian context (II).

I. The existence of a pre-colonial democracy in contradiction with that of Europe

The management of the city has always held a predominant place long before colonization, and all social strata of the different communities could participate in governance but at

different levels (A). This model of governance becomes nostalgic for conservatives in a context where democracy is considered by them as an imported concept clashing with Malian societal values (B).

A. The foundations of cultural resistance The foundations of cultural resistance

Long before the advent of colonization, African states already had their modes of governance and democracy where the management of power was entrusted to a category of people. This form of democratic political organization that Sub-Saharan precolonial Africa experienced were sacred monarchies or "acephalous republics" that colonization attempted to annihilate by trying to impose the Western model.

The ancient modes of governance, whose structure and structuring were based on kinship and lineage, had as their main objective the preservation of the tribe. Indeed, African societies, particularly Malian ones in their endogenous state, were characterized by stateless communities, composed of kingdoms and empires, assigning traditional legitimacies the role of a counter-power to the chiefs in order to protect the people from the ravages of royal despotism. Despite some imperfections, the architectures and political configurations of the precolonial period were stable and fairly democratic, in that the people could participate in the decision-making process.

However, this system of traditional governance has been the subject of harsh criticism by Westerners and a certain so-called "intellectual" African elite, who have raised false interpretations while overlooking the fact that this governance has been able to instill a sense of living together and social cohesion among various ethnic groups. According to Sakpane Gbati, "if, with independence, there was a real desire to create nations, the evidence of failure is striking since ethnic, tribal, and especially regional voting is rampant in Africa, as shown by the examples of the recent presidential and legislative elections in Kenya, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, etc." It is practically impossible for a man from the south to be elected in the north and vice versa; in a given region, it is the ethnic factor that predominates.

Post-independence Mali, like several African countries, will choose democracy as the mode of access and management of power in the 1990s after having lived three decades under single-party and military regimes.

Upon analysis, it appears that the single-party systems and the military regime, although they became unpopular at a certain

point in history, were attached to social, societal, and cultural values. The reference here is to the regime of Modibo Keita (1960-1968) and Moussa Traoré (1968-1991).

The former was part of the dynamics of Malian and African socialism, and this political stance is affirmed through this assertion by Modibo Keita: "On September 22, 1960, our people resolutely committed themselves to building a new society free from all forms of domination and exploitation." This society we are building is in line with the values of courage and hard work of our laboring masses. The implementation of this policy was based on the establishment of "a socialism adapted to the cultural realities of Mali, through a decolonization of mentalities."

Modibo's socialism is heavily inspired by scientific socialism, specifically Marxism, by organizing several activities aimed at promoting and respecting Malian customs and good morals. Moreover, the creation of the popular militia, the vigilance brigade, and the initiation of artistic and cultural biennials are among the projects on which President Modibo relied to revalue Malian traditional culture. The inculcation of patriotic values in the people allowed the socialist regime to build new Malians in line with its own cultural values while always considering the sanctity of power.

Also, the military regime long relied on this point to maintain its power through a kind of intertwining with a dictatorial baptismal background.

The boundary between the preservation and promotion of endogenous values and dictatorship under General Moussa Traoré is almost negligible. Attached to Malian customs and traditions, he managed to preserve President Keita's achievements on this point while remaining a conservative of Malian cultural values, before loudly proclaiming that "Mali is not ready for democracy." His concern could be explained by the fact that the actors of the democratic movement might be manipulated by the West to overthrow his regime and do to Mali what they could not achieve during his reign.

The arrival of democracy in Mali should, at first, be the subject of a rigorous, scientific analysis instead of a systemic political mimicry resembling Europe, which shares almost nothing culturally with Mali. Through this lack of perspective, the impression given by the democratic movement to astute political analysts is that the demand for democracy was largely based on emotion, motivated by the desire to free oneself from the hardships of a dictatorship that had lasted too long, oppressing the people, but without considering whether this new model of governance could align with cultural values, especially in a country like Mali.

B. The perception of defenders of socio-cultural values on democracy in Mali

Democracy is in harmony with certain universal fundamental principles such as equality in rights for all citizens, whereas Malian society is structured in such a way that a person occupies a position based on their social status (nobles, castes, slaves...). The advent of democracy appears in this sense as an opportunity for the oppressed to make the oppressors bow down through elections to rise to the top of the social hierarchy. This social inversion is not without consequences for maintaining social balance by changing the cardinal orders established by society for a long time.

Respect for human rights and democracy are interdependent; in the Malian context, for example, women's rights enshrine gender equality, prohibit all forms of discrimination based on sex (equality between men and women). These legal recognitions risk, according to sociologists, giving rise to rebellious women seeking political positions while challenging certain established social norms. Since the first republic, Mali has subscribed to the main legal instruments related to the protection of Human Rights in the various post-independence Constitutions. But it must be acknowledged that these legal mechanisms became effective with the advent of democracy, with the proliferation of numerous national civil society organizations working in the field, as well as the creation of national institutions responsible for the issue. Malian society had already assigned roles to women (guardians of the family, educators of children, social mediators...), which might awkwardly change with the advent of democracy.

Malian women have begun to occupy high political positions, even becoming prime ministers. This rise of women seems surreal just a century ago; however, these various advancements in promoting women are considered by "radicals" as the main cause of the fall of ATT's regime, which had the courage to appoint a woman as prime minister during his second term. For these individuals, women should not govern men; doing so would be a kind of "social and cultural heresy." However, the ATT regime was overthrown, mere coincidence?

In the same vein, if children's rights are poorly framed or not contextualized, they could, of course, give rise to a society where children will increasingly disrespect their parents. Beyond conservative citizens, some prominent political figures and heads of national institutions even opposed the creation of a children's parliament, arguing that more freedoms for children in a society like ours risk giving rise to new species of "cursed" children defying parental authority,

with the consequence of the degradation of morals, disguised under the veneer of "children's rights." Likewise, it is highly likely that teachers, professors, and all those responsible for the education of children will de facto become spectators of their powerlessness in the face of the rising tide of children's rudeness.

The right not to be held in slavery, a fundamental human right, could later become what lawyers call "soft law" for the simple reason that in Malian society, some communities legitimize these practices in accordance with their customs (Soninkés, Touaregs...). According to F. Diabaté: "For centuries, hereditary slavery has persisted in the West African Sahel, particularly in Mali, where thousands of people are victims of this so-called customary practice." This is very widespread in the central, northern, and western regions of Mali. This so-called customary practice is accompanied by forms of dependence and exclusion that persist even after the emancipation of slaves. Traditionally excluded and marginalized groups no longer intend to continue enduring repression without reacting, and choose the peaceful path to assert their rights to the social equality essential in a rule of law state. These practices, although prohibited by the Constitution of the Third Republic, remain a reality, a fact. The subjugated tirelessly work to change the game based on the law and the rule of law, the pillars of democracy, while the masters categorically oppose it. If democracy has not been able to change the established order of society, it must be acknowledged that it has allowed slaves to openly oppose this ancestral practice and to show their desire to free themselves from the ancestral bonds they currently deem unacceptable.

Freedom of expression is an important pillar of democracy; it allows all citizens to express their opinions on the life of the nation without the risk of being sanctioned. This right is guaranteed by the fundamental laws of all democratic states. In Mali, the advent of democracy, according to cultural value conservatives, has led to the obsolescence of the authority of power, and the proliferation of media has contributed to this decline. For them, "democracy desacralizes power by legally allowing the governed to bend it."

Upon analysis, it appears that the concerns raised by those opposed to the advent of democracy in Mali have proven to be more or less true over the years of democratic practices, with constitutional breaks and coups in a country whose democracy was praised beyond its borders collapsing like a house of cards.

II. The Ambivalence of the Concept of "Democracy" in the Malian Context

Linguistics specialists have difficulty translating the concept

into local languages for the simple reason that this concept is not only vague but also foreign (A). That's why it is relevant to adapt it to the Malian context (B).

A. A concept, an imported notion A concept, an imported notion

The democracy preached to Africans, particularly those in the Sahel, is a model manufactured and imposed by the West after colonization with the main objective of politically controlling both the rulers and the ruled through a form of neo-colonialism, by establishing an elective power system via multi-partyism. That is why the concept remains very vague if we try to idiomatically translate the concept of "democracy" into the vernacular languages of Mali. According to specialists in the Bambara language, it refers to "bè ya" or "jèmu fanga" or even "bè jè fanga," which approximately means "a power derived from one or the consensus..." "All these translations are rife with biases and objectively strip away the definitional essence as established by the early pioneers of democracy in Europe, given that it is the people who are placed at the heart of the democratic process, making it less appropriate for this new mode of governance. How do you expect this people to participate in this process?" This issue constitutes the very foundation of the failure of democracy in Mali, where the people find themselves trapped between conceptual deceit and the violation of the sacred principles of democracy. By nature, African societies, particularly those in Mali, are characterized by great rigidity; they are resistant to novelties, especially when these are in a dichotomous dynamic with the rules of functioning and governance of society.

The democratic principle of Western inspiration is supposed to be incompatible with the principles governing life in Malian society. Behind this argument also lies Jacques Chirac's famous quip that "the African continent was not ripe for the application of this political system." Indeed, democracy is a mode of governance that requires competition to occupy an elective position, a competition that could, to some extent, be seen as an object of compromises and manipulations, even questioning certain societal values (false promises, unnatural alliances...) or where candidates might, in some cases, renounce their own dignity (corruption, lies...) just to get elected.

Today, many politicians are despised and reviled by their community because of these mafia-like practices, which are not intrinsically linked to democracy as such, but rather to the metamorphosis our society has undergone following the advent of democracy, a new form of governance poorly explained to the populations and at odds with the customs and traditions of Mali.

Democracy has contributed to the emergence of a new breed of politicians. The modes of governance advocated during the medieval period are today praised by a segment of the population nostalgic for the past, where the Kurukan Fuga charter (1236) continues to serve as a reference for certain segments of the intellectual and political elite of Mali, who adamantly argue that during that period, clans could make political pacts. This system could serve as an alternative model to the imported modes of governance (democracy, decentralization).

Mali possesses indigenous political resources that allow it to disregard "the importation of supposedly universal models that actually only apply to the West." From there, should we understand that according to P. Quantin: "the qualification of experiences, their degree of democracy, or the quality of it, are biased since the model used to measure the deviation from the norm is never discussed." This model is considered an invariable and universal form of democracy, a reference produced and preserved outside African societies.

B. The question of adapting democracy to Malian socio-cultural value

The failure of democracy in Mali could be explained by the fact that its precursors transposed the European model to Mali. For proof, the Malian constitution of 1992, which is practically the legal tool for regulating the democratic game, is merely a reflection of a legal mimicry heavily inspired by the French constitution of 1958. According to Q. Patrick: "The 'African-style' democracy is part of a grand narrative, a teleological vision of a people's destiny." It corresponds to a logic of affirmation. Most often, however, it is conceived in a form that associates it with other models. African socialism, for example, stems from the idea of resource sharing in traditional African societies. Democracy is conceived there as the way to reach a consensus through the participation of everyone in the debate. "

This question of adapting democracy to Malian socio-cultural realities implies, according to Z. Joelle: "internally as well as in connection with the outside, the cultural sharing that ensures the translation between the individual and the group, between the past and the present, between repetition and invention, etc., appears as the major condition for cultural vitality." This vitality, political institutions are never the cause of it; they are means among many others, with which, ideally, they coexist. Cultural democracy then rests on democratic ways of life acquired through the principle of complementarity between conditions of individuation and conditions for the emergence of the common good, of which political institutions themselves are a part.

Chinese pragmatism in democratic matters highlights its desire to distinguish itself from the Western model, as the question of choosing whether or not to adopt democracy falls solely within the sovereignty of states. So imposing democracy on states is considered by China as a serious violation of the principle of "non-interference" in the internal affairs of sovereign states. It advances with its own democratic principles by showing the whole world that there is an Asian democratic model in line with Chinese socio-cultural norms. According to Marcel Hicter, "Animation involves cultural democracy by bringing decision-making places closer to the people and groups concerned." Cultural democracy stands in opposition, because we must speak clearly, to the democratization of culture.

In a context of globalization marked by cultural mixing, it is evident that all societies will undergo changes, and no society can remain immutable, but the ideal is to work in such a way that evolution does not undermine the cultural foundations of society.

The universality of democratic principles promoted by Europe and the United States, which remarkably align with numerous regimes that are officially democratic but unofficially dictatorial and repressive, is seen by some African analysts as a strategy to impose cultural values that contradict their own, as is the case with human rights argued by Western powers to anathematize early marriages, female genital mutilation, etc. In this regard, some African countries believe they are not the only ones criticizing Western values under the pretext of democracy, as Putin's Russia also denounces them, claiming they "do not correspond to Russian culture."

Mali could draw inspiration from Chinese and Russian examples to build a Malian democratic model by tapping into Malian genius through the valorization of national expertise.

Conclusion

Democracy is a process, which implies that it unfolds over time and in the long term. The great nations called "democratic" (England, the United States of America, Germany, France...) all went through moments of stumbling, but eventually managed to sustain themselves over the years. In Mali, the advent of democracy was made without a rigorous analysis of its compatibility with the customs and traditions of the country; the democratic movement merely settled for a true transposition of the European model to Mali or even a "copy-paste." It is important to note that the pioneers of democracy did not prioritize the education of the population in this new form of governance, especially since in a democracy, it is the people who are sovereign.

In light of the aforementioned elements, the observation is unequivocal: the democratic machine in Mali is broken, it is stuck. According to Spinoza, "a known ailment is half cured." The solution on the horizon is merely the question of adapting this democracy to Malian realities.

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