

The claim that democracy fares better in the West than in Africa is a fallacy

By [Steven Friedman](#)

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One day, if they follow instructions, Africa's new democracies will grow up to be "real" like those of Western Europe and North America. This assumption makes little sense - but it influences the way many people in the West and in Africa think about African democracies.



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Challenging this myth is a central theme of my [book](#) *Power in Action: Democracy, Citizenship and Social Justice*, which has just been published by Wits University Press.

Over the past two decades, the book notes, democracy has blossomed in Africa: in 1990, the continent housed, at most, four democracies. Today, countries in which the government is not at least elected in a free vote in which opposition parties contest are a [small minority](#). But there is still a deep-rooted feeling among Western academics, policymakers and journalists that African democracies are not yet “the finished product” – that they are still on their way to becoming full democracies.

This view gave birth to a field of academic study in the West – the search for “[democratic consolidation](#)”. It emerged because academics assumed that the new democracies were not yet “complete”, even though they called themselves democratic. And so they set out to discover whether democracies in [Africa](#) (and [Asia](#) and [Latin America](#)) were “consolidated”, which meant that they were the finished product.

The academics have never said how we would know a “complete” democracy when we saw one. They don’t have to – it is obvious from their writing that, to become the “finished article”, democracies have to become like those in the West.

The academics are reflecting a widely held view. Western governments that set out to [make the world democratic](#) were trying to “help” democracies outside the West to become just like those in it. European and US politicians who care about democracy elsewhere share this view. So do many Africans.

Colonial mindset

Academics on the African continent are keen to study whether their democracies are on the way to being “consolidated” and much commentary on the continent assumes that a “grown up” democracy looks like Britain, France or the US. This is particularly so in countries like South Africa which house a significant minority of people of Western origin, many of whom believe that the West is the home of civilisation to which the rest of the world should aspire.

This view has a distinctly colonial flavour. The moral excuse for colonialism was that it was [bringing to the colonised “civilisation”](#), which meant whatever people in the colonising country valued. There is no difference between this and trying to persuade the formerly colonised that their democracies can only become “real” if they mimic those in the West.

But it makes very little sense to claim that Western democracies are the “finished product”.

First, Western democracies differ between themselves. So which version are people in Africa meant to mimic? Must their countries become unitary states like Britain or France, or federal like the US and Germany? Must African states give unions and business associations a say in decisions as Sweden, Austria and Switzerland have done? Must language or religious groups be allowed a special say as Belgium and Holland have done? It is not clear which of the many forms of Western democracy Africans are meant to want to be.

Second, the “finished products” of the West are not that finished. Britain has an unelected house of traditional leaders and clergy – the [House of Lords](#). The US system allows the half million residents of one state to have the same say in the Senate as the 35 million of another. Several Western democracies detain suspects without trial – the US has done this for nearly two decades at [Guantanamo Bay](#), far longer than South Africa’s apartheid state ever detained anyone without trial.

The media in several Western countries is judged by specialists to be less free than those in some non-Western democracies. To show the absurdity of claiming that Western democracies are always better, think what would happen if an African president was elected because he won the vote in a state where the voting machines were faulty and the governor was his brother? This happened in the [US in 2000](#) – and no-one has declared it an “incomplete” democracy.

Third, the democratic idea is that every adult should have an equal say in the decisions which affect them. Where does that happen? Nowhere. So no democracy is a “finished product”. All fall short of the democratic goal and so Western democracies are no more real than those elsewhere. It also makes little sense to claim that one democracy is further down the road to “completion” than another – democracy has many aspects and on some, newer democracies outside the West are further down the road than those they are meant to want to be.

More people vote in some African countries than in some in the West. South Africa does more to promote women’s participation than most Western countries. A study of Botswana complained that its people did not value democracy because only 45% of voters knew the [name of their member of Parliament](#) – but the equivalent figure in Sweden was [only 33%](#) and several other European countries lagged far behind Botswana, whose voters are better informed than Swedes.

Inferiority complex

In sum, the democratic inferiority complex of many Africans is unwarranted. The idea that our democracies are “B Grade” and those of the West are prime quality is false.

None of this means that African democracies are better than those in the West. It means that the idea of “real” and “not yet real” democracies expresses a colonial mentality, not reality.

Like all democracies, Africa’s have much room for improvement. But they will never become what they could be if they struggle to become a copy of a romanticised Western democracy. Africa’s democracies will progress if they concentrate on the core democratic principle – giving more and more people a say over more and more issues – and debate how to do that in their particular conditions.

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