FOR A SUBSTANTIVE DEMOCRACY

EDITO

Five years after seizing power by force in Guinea, Mamadi Doumbouya thundered from the UN podium : *"Africa is suffering from a model of governance that was imposed on it. (...) This democratic model that you have so insidiously and skillfully imposed on us does not work."* So be it : he has since banned all demonstrations, forced opposition leaders into exile, and organized a brutal crackdown.

His speech resonates among the military juntas of the Sahel and among autocrats seeking to conceal their failures and disguise their quest for power as a *"decolonial"* aspiration. Often supported by coordinated disinformation campaigns, the syllogism is simple: if socioeconomic or security problems persist despite the presence of democracy, then this political system must be incapable of solving them.

These gravediggers of democracy take advantage of its cosmetic application, in the form of an *"administrative multiparty system,"* as Achille Mbembe writes, to reject the model rather than truly implement it. They present themselves to their fellow citizens as the counter model and the providential solution: in the face of *"imposed"* democracy, the liberating coup.

If this discourse resonates, it is also because it draws on legitimate popular frustration. Yet this bitterness targets less democracy itself than the form it has taken. If one asks those who live in a functioning democracy, the vast majority would not want to live under autocracy, just as those who live in authoritarian countries aspire, silently or otherwise, to democracy : the latter often vote with their feet to leave authoritarian regimes, ready to leave their homes in search of

freedom. This universal desire explains why even autocrats seek to preserve the appearance of democracy : the presence of a constitution mendable at their discretion, of institutions, likewise lacking any real independence from the executive, and above all the grand consecration of elections, even Mamadi Doumbouya, who had sworn he would never run for office.

Democracy provokes both frustration, as it often seems to disappoint in its procedures and in its ability to concretely improve people's lives, and unanimous support for a system which, to quote Churchill, *"is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried."*

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Popular sovereignty, collective deliberation, and the limitation of power are not cultural properties of the West, but fundamental human aspirations that can be found, in diverse forms, including in many African political traditions (consultative chieftaincies, palaver assemblies, councils of elders, community based decision making mechanisms).

What can be imported, and sometimes poorly adapted, are institutional models copied without local roots. Democracy is not a single regime that can be applied everywhere according to the same fixed institutional arrangements, nor does it rest on elections as the sole pillar of its vitality.

Its forms must be decided by citizens themselves, but they rest on universally sought principles : the reality of checks and balances, the duty of leaders to be accountable, the pursuit of social justice, political pluralism, freedom of expression, access to free and pluralistic sources of information, and the broadest possible inclusion of citizens and civil society in the decisions that affect them.

To use the words of thinkers such as Robert A. Dahl and Amartya Sen, we must move from a procedural democracy to a substantive democracy, so that it becomes both an end, achieving political freedom, and a means, making it possible to improve social justice and correct public policies through debate and criticism.

Coups d'état justified in the name of the inefficiency or corruption of civilian regimes do not solve the underlying problem : they replace imperfect institutions with concentrated power that is less accountable and even more fragile. For Gilles Yabi, the dysfunctions observed in certain African democracies stem less from the democratic ideal itself than from the capture of power by elites, the weakness of checks and balances, and insufficient citizen participation.

The answer, then, would not be the abandonment of democracy, but its deepening. Institutions adapted to local contexts, stronger oversight mechanisms, the direct involvement of citizens, and the rebuilding of political legitimacy through transparency and accountability ; democracy not only as a regime but as a *"social condition,"* in Tocqueville's words. Substantive democracy is driven by civic engagement, and therefore by the capacity and willingness of individuals to inform themselves, to participate, and to remain vigilant, sometimes even at the risk of their own interests.

This collective momentum is the condition that enables political leaders to have both the obligation and the ability to carry out the decisions for which they they have been entrusted with a mandate : improving the living conditions of the greatest number.