

Book Review: Claude Ake, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*

Dakar: Codesria Book Series, 2000. Pp 206.

Since the 1980s, when African governments started implementing economic and political reform policies, democracy has become a key paradigm for analyzing and assessing political developments in Africa. For the donor community, the pursuit of democratic politics has become a condition for further economic aid. Democracy as a political form is deemed to be the most appropriate framework for achieving social and economic progress.

Claude Ake's book, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa* examines the validity of such claims – that democracy is a universal political form, and that it is most appropriate for securing economic and social development, etc. It also examines the history of the idea of democracy and, more especially, the prospects for democracy in Africa, as well as the factors that could inhibit success.

The book opens with a discussion of democracy in its Athenian form and how the bourgeois class systematically trivialized it to what is now representative democracy – a shibboleth of liberal rights and institutions, having reduced it to "egotism, interests in conflict and no common interest" (p. 25). He adds that, in this revisionist enterprise the bourgeoisie has "defined and redefined [democracy] in an endless process of appropriating democratic legitimacy for political values, interests and practices that are in no way democratic ... This is the context in which Africa is democratizing" (p. 29).

Ake interrogates the attempts to impose on African countries the élitism of representative democracy, which is implied in its normative and institutional framework. He draws attention to the leading role of the masses in the democracy movement; because for them the struggle for democracy is part of an emancipatory project. They are the ones who have the most to gain from the restructuring of political and economic power and so have demonstrated commitment in the struggle, despite the obvious risks and sacrifices the it entails. They must, therefore, be recognized as the motive force of any serious democracy movement before the process can succeed. The book reminds us, and especially the donor community for whom democracy is desirable primarily because it is a public good and a condition for economic incorporation of Africa into the

world economy, that Africa's struggle for democracy is driven by the imperative of meeting the basic citizenship entitlements of the masses who have been denied for so long.

In this regard, the book further questions the conventional ways of solving what the author calls "the problem of simultaneity" which is the orthodox way in which the economic is separated from the political, and development is opposed to democracy. This, according to Ake, immediately makes democracy an enemy of economic reform and development. He calls for a new approach to this problem of simultaneity and proposes as a solution "the democratization of development and the development of democracy, that is, the deepening of the democratic experience in every sphere" (p. 87). This, he argues, would produce a new synthesis, a new development strategy. It is the pursuit of such a strategy that promises to yield the necessary emancipatory benefits for the masses.

Furthermore, the author makes critical observations about foreign intervention – both economic and political; political conditionality; and military expenditure, as well as their contribution, or otherwise, to the democracy project in Africa. Ake is conscious of the contradictions in the democratization process and, therefore, raises an important caution about the danger of settling for formal democracy, with the emphasis on multi-party systems, elections, representative institutions, etc as its essence. He warns that failure to exercise a critical caution "might compromise the emancipatory character" of the entire democratization project.

Without doubt, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa* is another powerful product by Claude Ake. The book provides a refreshing insight into the problem of democracy and democratization in Africa. Its appeal lies in the frank, engaging and incisive analysis of the contradictions in the idea of, and struggles for, democracy in Africa. It will surely count as a further tribute to the scholarship of Claude Ake and his stainless commitment to Africa's emancipation.

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