

# The United States of America's Ideals of Liberal Democracy Should Not Be Imposed on Zimbabwe

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## ABSTRACT

Democracy as a concept defies a single definition probably due to the settings and understandings within which it is regarded. It is a highly ambiguous concept. Democracy's definition is ascribed to the divergent context within which it is conceived and angles from which scholars tend to look at it. The specific form of democracy a country follows is contingent upon the country's context (state structures, policy practices, culture and history). Zimbabwe's democracy is built upon her realities that have nothing to do with classical liberal Western democracy founded on the struggle against absolute monarchies. There are many variants of democracy thus there is no need for the USA to impose its version of democracy on other states be it through military intervention as it did in Iraq and Afghanistan. The USA through the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Acts (ZIDERA) imposes sanctions on Zimbabwe unless she fulfills certain conditions, one of which is democracy.

**Keywords:** Democracy; Liberal democracy; Zimbabwe Democratic and Economic Recovery Act; Military intervention; Neoliberalism

## INTRODUCTION

It is imperative to begin by mentioning that there is a lot of ambiguity and lack of conceptual precision surrounding the word "democracy". This arises from the fact that democracy is a contested notion and people have different meanings attached to it in different contexts. Democracy is not just about the art of managing society, but more crucially, democracy is a way of life. However, there has been a remarkable consensus that has emerged concerning the minimal conditions that politics must meet in order to merit the appellation of "democratic". I would try to interrogate the concept of democracy and its meaning in different contexts, especially the African-Zimbabwean context vis-à-vis the Zimbabwe Democracy and Economic Recovery Act's (ZIDERA) context. Through ZIDERA, the US exercises arm-twisting tactics against Zimbabwe. ZIDERA is a US sanctions law which precludes multilateral institutions dealing with the US from extending lines of credit to Zimbabwe.

If democracy is indeed a way of life, we must appreciate that different societies have different traditions and cultures that shape their ways of life. Out of necessity therefore, Zimbabwe's history, culture and beliefs shape her way of life from which her conception of democracy originates. A holistic conception of democracy should guide us as opposed to narrow conceptions of democracy peddled by the US government. What are the rules, procedures and arrangements that are needed if democracy is to endure? The initial standpoint of my argument is that there are many types or forms of democracy depending on a particular context, for example, history, politics, culture and socio-economic conditions. Therefore because of the multifaceted nature of the concept of democracy or diverse practices of democracy, it

follows that there will be a varied set of effects that will be produced. It stands to reason that the specific form of democracy a country follows is contingent upon its socio-economic conditions as well as its entrenched state structures and policy practices [1]. Thus one would not be qualified to label Zimbabwe's democracy as "bad" or USA's democracy as "good" because democracy is a relative term or concept that should defy universal application. Again, no country is qualified to prescribe to another country the type or form of democracy that should be practised because the factors that shape one country's type or form of democracy are unique to that country and suitable to its context. The bottom line is that democracies are distinguished by the norms that condition how their rulers come to power and practices that hold them accountable for their actions. Owing to its history, socio-economic development status and differentiated conditioning, it is important that Zimbabwe negotiates a form/type of democracy that best suits its context not one that is ZIDERA-oriented. Zimbabwe must not struggle to meet standards of liberal democracy because that has its own history and logic anathema to Zimbabwe's roots. Instead Zimbabwe should invest in time modeling democracy in a fashion that builds on her realities.

Liberal democracy is a liberal political ideology operating under the principles of classical liberalism [2] also known as Western democracy which traces its origin to 18th century Europe. A liberal conception of democracy is neither intrinsically more democratic than, for example, a social-democratic approach but they are just differently democratic. This implies that measures aimed at "developing the private sector" are no more democratic than those aimed at "developing the public sector" [3]. However, both if carried to extremes, could undermine the

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practice of democracy, the former by destroying the basis of satisfying collective needs; the latter by destroying the basis for satisfying individual preferences.

As we were taught to believe, democracy is a word that has a specific history from Ancient Greek civilization. While the concept and practices have gone through several iterations, ancient Athenian democracy remains a unique and intriguing experiment because it was about direct participation and not citizens voting for others to make decisions on their behalf. Athenian democracy was a response to centuries of rule by oligarchies and after successful resistance against Persian onslaught on Greece in 490 BC, ordinary people who were instrumental in the resistance struggles demanded a greater say in the affairs of the city. This is analogous to the “masses” resisting together with ZANLA and ZIPRA liberation forces against colonial domination and then leading to the majority elections in 1980. This historical development should shape the context in which we should understand democracy in Zimbabwe. It should be democracy that is underpinned by the liberation of an oppressed people. It should be democracy presided over by a radicalization of power that shifted the balance decisively to the poorest sections of Zimbabwe society. Zimbabwe’s democracy was dictated by history and response to specific circumstances.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Neoliberal democracy had a specific history of a struggle against the absolute rule of monarchies. It was perfected after the industrial era in the West and then spread across the globe today being aided by capitalism [4]. It has thus been difficult to reach a consensus on the definition of democracy. There are many variants of democracy today. For example, external imposition of democracy goes back to the origins of liberal theory in international politics, and has been especially prevalent in US foreign policy making, examples include Woodrow Wilson’s attempts to draw “self-determination” maps for Eastern Europe following World War II, the Kennedy-Johnson forceful “nation-building” strategies in Vietnam; and George Bush’s apparent belief that Iraq and Afghanistan can be re-made in a Western democratic image [5]. This shows that in the US policy, lip service is frequently paid to democratization, that is, when put to test it is not always clear that democracy is the top priority. Certain types of interventions can hasten the process of democracy, for example, the “soft coup” of November 16 2017 in Zimbabwe. From the perspective of democracies, military intervention may be necessary and permissible to “free” the people from dictatorship. Further weight is lent to the forced democracy argument by the case studies presented by. He argues that in some cases, for example, Cuba 1899-1902, US reformist pressure was applied and became effective while in others it either was not applied or failed, for example, the Philippines where counter-insurgency was employed instead of liberalization, and South Vietnam where liberalization was aborted in a series of US sponsored coups. The implication is that the type of strategy used after intervention makes a difference in the long term prospects for democratization in a particular country. US narrow, procedural definition of democracy focused on the relative openness of a country’s political institutions. However, some of the cases that the US deems to entail successful democratization are not really so successful after all. Case studies suggest that in many cases the intervention targets have not yet transitioned into thorough or stable democracies [6].

On another dimension, in many countries elections have indeed been regular usually after five years, but the extents to which they have been “free and fair” are doubted not just in Africa but in America, Europe

and elsewhere in the world. It was Election Day, November 8 1960, two Americans, a Republican Richard Nixon and Democrat John F Kennedy faced off in one of the closest presidential elections in US history. By the time it was over, John F Kennedy had won and Nixon’s camp was accusing the other side of dirty tricks. Do elections really serve any purpose in the life of ordinary people? The majority continue to live in the same sub-standard accommodation, election after election in many countries, Zimbabwe included. Any change of future experience by the ordinary people has little to do with elections. When I think of who has been behind the elections, I can see no further than some agents of Western capitalism bankrolling the process to extend Western culture and hegemony across the world.

Why does the US through ZIDERA set conditions for economic aid or re-institute economic sanctions against Zimbabwe? During election season in Zimbabwe, political leaders work their butts off to ingratiate foreign Western powers on the proviso that they would receive much needed foreign investment. These will be elections with strings attached, fettered elections; the victor at all costs should be a Western protégé. Zimbabwe as far back as 1990 embraced neo-liberal democracy because she found acceptance within the donor community and Western democracies that sought to connect the processes to market-based economic reforms and development in the country. It is imperative at this point to mention that the neo-liberal economic orthodoxy according to Thomas Friedman, expects a country to privatize state-owned enterprises, rationalize the public service, liberalize trade, deregulate foreign investment, deregulate capital markets, make the currency convertible and eradicate corruption. According to Friedman, this is the only path to success in the new global economy. However, it is interesting to note that Japan is an example of a country that defied donning Friedman’s “straightjacket” and succeeded. Today Japanese cars are considered all over the world. Had the Japanese government followed the free trade economics, there would be no Lexus to export. Toyota today, would at best be a junior partner to some Western car manufacturer or worse, could have been wiped out. The same would have been true for the entire Japanese economy. It is no secret that there were economic disasters in those developing countries, for example, Zimbabwe, that embraced economic liberalization as prescribed by the Bretton Woods Institutions. It is reported that these countries suppressed or abandoned those activities which they were good at (agriculture, mineral extraction and labour-intensive manufacturing) and promoted “white elephant” projects that made them feel proud but were economic nonsense.

According to Chang, the per capita income of developing countries which pursued protectionist policies as opposed to economic liberalization grew by 3.0% annually. Since the 1980s, after implementing neo-liberal policies, economies of developing countries grew at only about half the speed seen in the 1960s and 1970s (1.7%). China and India accounted for 12% of total developing countries’ income in 1980 and 30% in 2000, after refusing to put on Thomas Friedman’s “straightjacket” [7]. It is argued that growth failure has been particularly noticeable in Latin America and Africa where neo-liberal programmes were implemented more thoroughly than in Asia [8]. Posit that since the 1980s when the continent embraced neo-liberalism, Latin America has been growing less than one-third of the rate of the past years of protectionism and state intervention. As for Africa, since the 1980s, it has seen a fall in living standards. This is a damning indictment of the neo-liberal orthodoxy, because most of the African economies have been practically run by the IMF and the World Bank over the past quarter of a century. As a result of neo-liberal policies, income inequality has increased in most countries, and growth has significantly slowed down [9]. Economic instability has markedly increased during the period of neo-liberal dominance. In other words,

neo-liberalism has failed to deliver on all fronts of economic life such as growth, equality and stability yet Zimbabwean politicians are in frenzied efforts bowl in hand trying to outdo the other in securing IMF-World bank loans, and US investment. It is imperative to note that contrary to what the neo-liberal orthodoxy would have us believe, virtually all the successful developing countries since World War II initially succeeded through nationalistic policies, using protection, subsidies and other forms of government intervention.

Through exporting its tenets of neo-liberal democracy, the US seeks to globalize its own political culture and market ideology [10]. Whatever democracy that ensues after elections in developing countries, must equal or be neo-liberal democracy and anything outside that it was/is fought, sometimes with brute force and that is why leaders like Thomas Sankara (Burkina Faso) and Patrice Lumumba (Democratic Republic of Congo then Zaire) were eliminated. Neo-liberal democracy is the least suited for Africa let alone for Zimbabwe's realities. Neo-liberal democracy led to the trapping of African states between the demands of external donors for economic liberalization on one hand, and the needs of political majorities on the other. Neo-liberal democracy is not relevant to Zimbabwe's historical and socio-economic circumstances because its specific history is far from representing the Zimbabwean problem. It should be noted that the greatest shortcoming of liberal democracy is its exaggerated focus on the autonomous individual, a reality which is contrary to Africa's dominant communal spirit [11]. Liberal democracy is a complete mismatch with Zimbabwe's realities and should be radically rethought in light of Zimbabwe's common history, exploitation, colonialism and dictatorship; most of which were fermented by the very agents of Western liberal democracy. Furthering democracy would require the creative customization of the conventional values and principles of democracy with the social realities of Zimbabwe; otherwise democratization degenerates into another assault on indigenous cultures and becomes alienating [12]. Appropriate democracy should also include how big powers treat "lesser states", for example how US treats Mexico, Iran, Zimbabwe, North Korea, to mention but a few. When the US bullies these countries then she does not qualify to be labelled democratic. Democracy brings a more peaceful and less belligerent foreign policy. For the US to be an appropriate democracy, she needs to give better and equal treatment to "lesser states" than her. An appropriate democracy should be measured on whether or not electoral democracy produces a government committed to pro-poor growth or reduces inequality.

US is a key funder of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and while the restrictions remain in place, economic revival of Zimbabwe remains difficult. How democratic is the US then? However, Knutsen, et al. argues that while economic development prevents democratic backsliding, it does not show a significant relationship to democratization. This suggests that democracy is not clearly identified as a by-product of economic development. The Trump administration re-imposed economic sanctions against Zimbabwe and re-affirmed the ZIDERA a week after the July 30 2018 watershed elections, saying the country had no "culture of democracy". How democratic could the US be when ZIDERA led to devastating economic challenges that led to Zimbabwe reportedly now sitting with about 85% unemployment?

## CONCLUSION

ZIDERA is a typical example of undemocratic behavior of the US against a sovereign country. The drafters of the ZIDERA have no understanding of the reality on the ground in Zimbabwe. Quoting an article of March 23 2018 by journalist Hopewell Chin'ono, the

bill came after members of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Biti, Chamisa and Ben Freeth had been to Capitol Hill. The message they delivered was that sanctions should be retained until after the elections. A couple of weeks later, Senators Jeff Flake and Chris Coons had now come up with a ZIDERA amendment bill essentially capturing the essence of those Capitol Hill requests and presentations. This bill could have been meant to influence the election results in a certain direction by strangling the few lines of credit and financial guarantees from the African Development Bank (ADB) because the bill specifically noted the need to withhold funding from ADB to the government of Zimbabwe; funding that was now stabilizing local financial institutions. The bill talked about land reform issues and payment for repossessed farms to white farmers. Chin'ono questions how that was linked to a free, fair and credible election? The bill talked about stopping financial assistance to Zimbabwe by the ADB, which was the only financial institution assisting Zimbabwe. Do these bully tactics by the US on Zimbabwe augur well for democratic practices? ZIDERA according to seemed obsessed with issues which Zimbabweans could decide on themselves, for example, election management issues, and choice of the electoral management body. The question that arises would be: will Trump accept a foreign power prescribing how the Americans should deal with the victims of slavery, racism and police brutality? The bill also demands that the Zimbabwe government accounts for diamond revenues going 18 years ago, this essentially meant the US managing the economic issues of a sovereign country. The US has deemed itself fit to monitor or be the arbiter of standards of democracy in other sovereign states. She has now monitored how well standards of democracy are being met in political donor funding recipients.

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