

# *The Consequences of Excessive Democratization in Developing Countries*

Zixuan Zhang\*

*WLSA Shanghai Academy, Shanghai, China*

*\*Corresponding author: 15618517686@163.com*

**Keywords:** Democracy, Developing Countries, Economic Development, Governance, Elite Influence

**Abstract:** This article challenges the common belief that democracy is inherently good, arguing that in developing countries, it often fails to deliver economic growth or effective governance. Instead, democracy can perpetuate colonial legacies and elite control. The author cites cases like South Korea, where authoritarian rule initially enabled rapid development before transitioning to democracy. In many developing nations, weak infrastructure and widespread poverty hinder democratic success. Moreover, democratic systems are vulnerable to lobbying and elite influence, which can undermine reforms and harm public trust. Therefore, democracy is not a one-size-fits-all solution for all nations.

## 1. Introduction

In 2025, many people automatically link the term 'democracy' with 'good' or 'desirable', a system where everyone has a voice. Democracy, however, may not deserve all the praise it gets, in some cases at least. In developing countries, the legacy of democracy has been economically ineffective and a tool for a continued legacy of colonialism in different forms. There are many democracies we could examine, but developing countries are newer and pose a greater set of political challenges, thus providing the best test of democracy's true efficacy. In these countries, democracy has often failed to bolster the economy and modernize the country. Former Western colonial powers continue to utilize liberal democracy to exert control over developed countries instead of allowing them self-determination. Even if democracies are at times morally desirable and representative of the people's will, they can lead to undesirable outcomes and systems in mainly developing countries.

The theory of democracy itself originated and was first put in practice in the Western world over two thousand years ago, first described with Greek words as: "demos (people) and kratos (rule)," which combined means rule by the people, a "classical" idea of democracy [1]. This theoretical concept has taken many interpretations since, but generally we can think of it as "mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control". An essential aspect of this conception is a society in which "all members of the collective enjoy effective equal rights" [2]. In practice however, 'equal rights' in democracies have been debatable. Until recently, many so-called democracies discriminated on the basis of race, gender, and politics; and in countries such as the US and South Africa, albeit subtle at times, up to the present day. Indeed, it is necessary to discuss true democracy by looking at the very real failed applications, where democracy

is not what it was conceived to be. Nowhere is this more evident than in developing countries.

## 2. Economic Development and Democracy

Democratization in developing countries does not guarantee faster economic development in the short term and even hinders the economy in some cases. Many developing countries, especially previously colonized countries, at the time of liberalization, were woefully under-industrialized and lacked basic infrastructure such as a stable electrical grid and modern hospitals. A substantial amount of their respective populations lived under the poverty line and many were below the absolute poverty line, without access to appropriate nutrition, food, or sanitized water. Even though democracy might be desirable in a context like this, such conditions hardly facilitate a successful liberal political system. Even the most liberty-loving people will have difficulty prioritizing democratization when they do not have food on their table or a roof over their head.

For developing countries, improving the economy and elevating living conditions is a prerequisite to democratic potential. In conditions such as the ones described above, forcing democratic systems can actually have deleterious effects on economic growth. Much literature has established that "democracy does not widely and directly facilitate more rapid economic growth" [3]. In fact, early democratic development is likely to harm economic potential. Democratic governments usually concentrate their efforts on protecting and maintaining the newly established liberal regime, rather than economic development. Empirically, Lancaster (1991- 92:159) notes that in Africa, economic conditions typically worsened in the short run following political liberalization because of government neglect of economic matters [4]. On the other hand, authoritarian governments have the potential privilege of focusing solely on rejuvenating and improving the economy without facing opposition groups and dissent. It makes sense that a government with limited resources and time may not be able to focus on the economy when their own power is under threat as part of the constant election cycle characteristic of a democracy.

South Korea may be one of the most prominent examples of how democracy is not a "one-size-fits-all" solution. As the country was modernizing, the government's incompetence and corruption led to immense frustration and led to the eventual military coup of 1961 led by general Park Chung-Hee. Controversial though he may be, Park's regime ushered in an era of economic development [5]. In 1987, South Korea, a now modernized and economically potent power, was able to transition successfully to the stable democracy it is today. This period of extended economic development that placed Korea among one of the most advanced economies in the world is also known today as the "miracle on the Han River." Of course, not all dictators are competent nor benevolent, but Park's example demonstrates that at least in some cases, democracy is not the best solution. This example can be extended to many other countries, especially prominent ones that saw Western military intervention at a given point in time, such as Libya, Iraq or Afghanistan.

## 3. Governance and Democracy

The African and Asian examples are no accident but rather outcomes of the structures of democracies, which are not necessarily designed to facilitate growth. Democratically elected representatives are especially vulnerable to lobbying due to the competitive nature of democracy, which necessarily forces candidates to cater to voter wishes in order to stay in elected office. As a result, democracies usually struggle to carry out unpopular yet much needed economic and social reforms, especially when they impose economic hardship on "politically effective groups" and affect partisan politics [6]. Voters of different social classes exert different levels of political influence - in a democracy, money determines who can hold more rallies, run more advertisements and access publicity, and the general 'instruments of political influence' thus advantaging elite voters and their

favorable policies [7].

Empirical evidence demonstrates how this process works: Weymouth (2012) finds evidence that in forty-two developing and transition countries, firms reported greater lobbying power in democracies versus non-democracies [8]. Weymouth finds that the lobbying power of firms increased with the level of checks and balances within the government structure. This is consistent with a model in which democracies increase the number of access points for lobbying actors to influence the government. In a developing country, where it is imperative that the government attempts to secure more public resources and developing infrastructure for the people, this can be especially harmful. A government that has more access points for lobbying is likely to favor those with resources to access officials. Thus, democracies vulnerable to elite control are likely to perpetuate anti-poor policies [9].

Furthermore, a government vulnerable to lobbying not only has consequences for efficiency and competency, it also translates into low public trust. Indeed, a government that is not even trusted by its own people suffers multiple malus effects, such as strikes, low voting participation, marginalization of certain segments of society, etc. Low public trust means low legitimacy, low civil participation and ineffective governance (OECD). Thus, in an unstable, easily influenced democracy, a host of effects that lead to citizen distrust and a generally ineffective government can arise.

#### 4. Conditions for Democracy

A successful and sustainable democracy also depends on well-informed, well-educated and civically minded citizens who are willing to actively protect and maintain their democracy. Multiple studies based on empirical evidence have concluded that there are 'social prerequisites' for having a democracy and generally a better educated electorate leads to more liberal politics [10]. If democracy truly means rule by the people, a necessity for the system to work is an educated populace that is knowledgeable about current political matters. Developing countries often lack the infrastructure for such an educated populace. As of 2021, countries classified as "least developed" by the United Nations suffer from an average adult literacy rate of 65%, with Chad (24.8%) and Mali (33.12%) being at the bottom [11]. Certain policies, such as combating inflation, which is very important and, in many cases, more important than economic growth, are not fully understood by the electorate and hence hard to push through parliament/congress, with little willingness by the government.

Without a baseline literacy, it's difficult to imagine how these countries can facilitate their citizens to fulfill civic duties and combat corruption. A voting polity that is uneducated is more likely to fall prey to unscrupulous politicians. It might be reasonable to expect that in developing countries, laying down key foundations by providing accessible education infrastructure would allow these countries to experience a relatively stable transitional period. In some cases, facilitating such infrastructure could be best achieved outside of democracy, even if the ultimate goal is for democratic government.

#### 5. Democracy and Former Colonies

Thus far, this essay has discussed democracy in terms of its value for economic development and concrete societal outcomes. Some supporters of democracy might argue that democracy has intrinsic value beyond its effects on economic growth. In developing countries, however, democracy might in fact not be such a morally good choice. Most of the developing countries in the third world have a history of being colonized by Western powers, and current attempts to democratize these countries can exert force that is essentially an extension of colonization. In the post-colonial period, many previous colonies depend on foreign aid for their infrastructure and economic development. Much of this foreign aid from liberal democracies is dependent on conditions that the aid recipients democratize. OECD donors have in the past years steadily increased their funds allocated to such conditional aid. \$151.66 million USD of funds were allocated to "Government and Civil Society" in

1980 and that number has increased over thirty-one times by 2003, reaching \$4.712 billion USD [12]. This creates systems of control in which former colonized countries are still catering to Western demands to democratize for their survival, instead of focusing on their own domestic priorities.

In examining the example of Ghana, Bernard Forjwoor states: "direct control over foreign territorial spaces may have ended, but colonialism was re-signified in other forms. Liberal democracy, neoliberal politics, statesmanship, the commonwealth system, international legal structures, aid regimes, and the concepts of development/modernity, to mention a few, are now reconfigured forms of the colonial, only in these cases, the colonial cannot be contested as illicit." In other words, transitioning to a democracy may cost a country its sovereignty and autonomy, much like the 20th century colonialism. Therefore, in cases where a country is reliant on conditional aid, democracy may turn out to be a more harmful tool than a helpful moral good.

## 6. Human Rights and Dignities

Proponents of democracy may say that the alternative to liberal democracy is authoritarianism or totalitarianism, where human rights and human dignity were ignored, where genocides and extreme repression exists, and indeed there is no denying that there has been some terrible atrocities committed in authoritarian countries such as Cambodia and North Korea. However, what such arguments fail to consider is that there are democracies such as the U.S. and Israel that have committed atrocities before, and authoritarian countries such as Hungary and El Salvador that has not committed similar acts.

Moreover, there is a balance between a fully-fledged democracy and a North Korea Style dictatorship; authoritarianism is a scale. The more scholarly and less semantic definition of authoritarianism, according to Spanish American political scientist Juan Linz (1964), is "Political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization." In reality, there are many middle grounds or sweet spots for developing countries.

One example is the case of Singapore. Singapore is what many people will call a 'illiberal democracy', 'authoritarian democracy', or has Freedom House (2024) calls it, "Hybrid Regime". The country of Singapore has some democratic elements such as presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as some less democratic norms such as a dominant system. As a result, Singapore has been able to avoid many of the downsides of liberal democracies while still preserving some democratic institutions. In a few decades, Singapore has been able to transform from a British colony to one of the world's most important financial hubs.

Hybrid or transitional countries such as Singapore, Hungary, Turkey and the UAE proves that the alternative of liberal democracy is not necessarily an Orwellian society, and authoritarianism is a spectrum, not just a single category.

## 7. Conclusion

While democracy is sometimes morally attractive, and has contributed greatly to the standard of living for citizens of the developed world, many developing countries are not ready for such a drastic change in governance, especially because with democracy, a minimum level of electorate literacy is required, and democracy can be a stomping ground for corruption, lobbying and post-colonial influence. As much as democracy is appealing, it is not a one-size-fits-all cookie cutter solution for every country, especially in developing countries with systemic woes and strife, where democratization has proved to be rather ineffective in numerous countries across the globe.

Therefore, in these cases, limiting democratization in the first instance might be the best course of action to take. While respecting basic human dignities, developing countries should first develop their economy, provide security and stability, and prepare for a smooth transition before carrying out

reckless reforms.

## References

- [1] Enia, Jason. *Ambivalent Answers to Important Questions: The Relationship between Foreign Aid and Democracy. Working Paper, December 2006.* <https://www.democracy.uci.edu/files/docs/conferences/grad/enia.pdf>
- [2] Forjwuor B. Colonising 'Free' Will: A Critique of Political Decolonisation in Ghana[J]. *Theoria*, 2020, 67(164): 48-85.
- [3] Glaeser E L, Ponzetto G A M, Shleifer A. Why does democracy need education?[J]. *Journal of economic growth*, 2007, 12: 77-99.
- [4] Graham E M. *Reforming Korea's industrial conglomerates*[J]. Peterson Institute Press: All Books, 2003.
- [5] Greenwood, Shannon, and Shannon Greenwood. *Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety.* Pew Research Center, 14 Apr. 2024, [www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/global-public-opinion-in-an-era-of-democratic-anxiety](http://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/12/07/global-public-opinion-in-an-era-of-democratic-anxiety).
- [6] Lancaster C. *Democracy in Africa*[J]. *Foreign Policy*, 1991 (85): 148-165.
- [7] Linz, Juan. *Juan Linz's Definition.* BH Courses, 1964. [http://www.bhcourses.org/juan\\_linzs\\_definitiondoc.pdf](http://www.bhcourses.org/juan_linzs_definitiondoc.pdf).
- [8] OECD. *Lobbyists, Governments and Public Trust.* OECD, vol. 3, 2014. [www.oecd.org/gov/ethics/lobbyists-governments-trust-vol-3-highlights.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/gov/ethics/lobbyists-governments-trust-vol-3-highlights.pdf).
- [9] Samarsinghe S. *Democracy and democratization in developing countries*[M]. Harvard School of Public Health, 1994.
- [10] Sirowy L, Inkeles A. *The effects of democracy on economic growth and inequality: A review*[J]. *On measuring democracy*, 2017: 125-156.
- [11] Wang Z. *Public support for democracy in China*[J]. *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2007, 16(53): 561-579.
- [12] Weymouth S. *Firm lobbying and influence in developing countries: a multilevel approach*[J]. *Business and Politics*, 2012, 14(4): 1-26.