

Kwasi Wiredu's Alternative to Majoritarian Democracy in Contemporary Africa

Olajide Abiodun OBI, Ph.D.

Department of Philosophy,
Lagos State University, Ojo, Lagos
Tel: 08060026146, 08026655505

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8027-1668?lang=en>

E-mail: olajide.obi@lasu.edu.ng, olajide.obi@gmail.com

Abstract

Kwasi Wiredu, a prominent Ghanaian philosopher, having realized the damage the Western-style democracy has done to Africa, proposed an alternative form of democracy to salvage Africans from political depression. The alternative suggested by Wiredu to replace the majoritarian democracy adopted by Africa since its colonial era is Consensual Democracy. Since Wiredu Suggested this form of democracy in his 1995 paper, titled, “Democracy and Consensus: A Plea to Non-Party Polity,” there have been several arguments condemning the system as not compatible with contemporary African societies. This paper explores Wiredu's critique of Western-style democracy and builds on that to say that despite its inadequacies, consensual democracy is more African than majoritarian democracy and should be worked on rather than discarded. In doing this, the paper explains Wiredu's vision for Africa and examines the implications of his ideas for the political landscape of the continent. By delving into Wiredu's philosophical contributions, this work seeks to contribute to the ongoing discourse on democracy and governance in Africa.

Keywords: Consensus, Democracy, Majoritarian, Africa, Governance Politics

Introduction

Kwasi Wiredu, born in 1931 in Ghana, is recognized as one of Africa's leading contemporary philosophers. He has made significant contributions to various philosophical fields. However, one of his most influential areas of engagement is his call for the decolonization of African thought, religion, philosophy, and political system. His efforts at ensuring that African minds are decolonized led to the critique of Western-style democracy and his proposal for a distinctively African alternative. In a continent marked by political instability and a history of colonialism, Wiredu's ideas have had a profound impact on discussions about governance and democracy. According to him, consensual democracy was the system in practice in pre-colonial African societies. He uses the example of the Ashanti Society of Ghana to illustrate how consensual democracy was practised then.

It is a well-known fact that majoritarian democracy is pretty expensive, especially in countries with limited resources struggling to develop. The system requires a lot of infrastructure and resources to hold elections and to support all the parties and candidates involved. Consensual democracy, on the other hand, could be much less costly since it does not require the same level of infrastructure or resources. It could be more inclusive to accommodate the voice of everyone rather than just the majority. This is why contemporary African states need to reconsider the adoption of consensual democracy as a better alternative to majoritarian democracy. Rather than progressing positively despite her natural and human resources, Africa keeps retreating. Leadership and governance are major reasons considered responsible for African underdevelopment and regression. All efforts to take Africa out of its political disaster

seem like a wasted effort simply because the people are doing the same thing repeatedly and they are expecting a different result. This paper seeks to expose and critically examine Wiredu's critique of Western-style democracy and his alternative vision for Africa. It will suggest a better way to make the suggested alternative democracy work for contemporary Africa.

Kwasi Wiredu on Western-Style Democracy

Apart from some known facts about majoritarian democracy such as being expensive and not African, Wiredu argues that Western-style democracy is often viewed as a universal model without regard for cultural diversity. The imposition of what is seen as a form of neo-colonialism that fails to account for the unique historical, social, and cultural contexts of African nations is what has put the continent into serious political and economic instability. Africans are known for being communitarian and they do their things together as one. The Western majoritarian democracy jettisoned this important aspect of the African culture and introduced to them individualism and class struggle (Wiredu, 1995:179). Wiredu critiques the representative nature of Western democracy, which tends to limit direct citizen participation. He argues that this model does not sufficiently empower ordinary citizens and can lead to elite capture and political exclusion. He posited that the adoption of consensual democracy would ensure better representation of all citizens without majority-minority dichotomy (Wiredu, 1996:186). Wiredu may be right in his argument against majoritarian democracy but fails to acknowledge the fact that contemporary African society is more complex than the pre-colonial African society where consensual democracy was practiced.

Majoritarian democracy, according to Wiredu, often neglects moral and ethical considerations. He suggests that African political systems must incorporate traditional ethical values and norms such as belief in interconnectedness, respect for communal interest, etc. into their democratic practices. This can be said to be a good suggestion looking at how African leaders under the rule of majoritarian democracy behave. There is corruption in other parts of the World, but the level of corruption in Africa is alarming, which is a result of a lack of interconnectedness between the leaders with the people and a lack of respect for communal interest over their interest. All efforts to get the country rid of corruption have proven abortive. It is on this note that this paper agrees with Wiredu that the breach of traditional ethical values and norms which goes with a severe punishment from the gods should be included in African political/legal ethos.

Wiredu's Alternative Vision for Africa

Kwasi Wiredu in his work, “Democracy and Consensus: A Plea for a Non-Party Polity”, published in 1995 acknowledges that traditional political structures are old-fashioned as a form of governance for contemporary Africa. He thought of consensual democracy as an option to replace the problematic majoritarian democracy. He argues that consensus could at least be conceived as a better idea informing political architecture and practice in Africa (Ani, 2021:112). Wiredu proposes a consensual model of democracy rooted in African communitarian values. This model emphasizes consensus-building and decision-making through dialogue and deliberation. It seeks to involve all members of the community in the political process. Wiredu advocates for the integration of African cultural values and traditions into the political sphere. He contends that African societies

should not abandon their cultural heritage but rather use it as a foundation for ethical governance (Wiredu, 1995:54). Another reason why Wiredu suggested consensual democracy is the fact that as a political system, it decentralized political power to the community level, allowing for greater local autonomy and participation. This, he argues, can promote grassroots democracy and empower citizens. According to him, the family which is the smallest unit of society is involved in decision-making as it affects them directly. Each family has a lineage head, who represents his family at the village council (Wiredu, 1995:55).

Consensual democracy may be a solution to issues like gridlock and polarization that are affecting representative democracy. However, some practical challenges would need to be addressed to make it work in the real world. For example, it might be hard to reach a consensus on complex or divisive issues. There is also the risk that a small group of people could hold up the decision-making process if they refuse to consent. Though Wiredu mentioned that it is not in all cases that consensus will be reached by the people, so in cases where consensus is not reached, the aggrieved parties should be persuaded to consent. If at the end of it all some groups of people still do not agree with others, the fact that they are part of the decision-making process is something very important since everybody is aware and part of the discussion. By incorporating cultural values, such as respect for elders and communal decision-making into the political system, Wiredu aims to create a more culturally grounded form of democracy (Wiredu, 1995:55).

Some Challenges of Consensual Democracy

When Kwasi Wiredu suggested the replacement of majoritarian

democracy with consensual democracy, scholars such as Fayemi Kazeem (2010), Emmanuel C. Eze (1997), and Victor Olaonipekun (2020), pointed out some shortcomings of the suggested system. Consensual democracy when it was practised in pre-colonial Ashanti society and some other African societies, seems to be a good system that works for the people better than the majoritarian democracy. Contemporary African societies are complex, urbanized, and more populated. This has created challenges for the implementation of consensual democracy. Among such challenges that implementing Wiredu's consensual democracy has posed is the challenge of reconciling traditional African values with the demands of a modern, globalized world. Colonization has caused an imposition of some of the Western cultural values on African societies which has changed the African orientations in areas such as family values and many other areas. Having a family compound where every member of the family lives has become a thing of the past. What we have now are individuals living with their nuclear families in units of flat or apartment. This is a serious challenge for the adoption of consensual democracy in contemporary Africa.

Another challenge is that African societies would need to undertake significant institutional reforms to transition to a consensual and culturally grounded democracy, which may require time. Having been using Majoritarian democracy for over six decades, there will be a need to change the constitutions of African countries to reflect the pros and cons of consensual democracy. Apart from the constitutions, the political structure of the societies will have to change to what will suit contemporary societies. More importantly, the success of Wiredu's alternative vision depends on the political will of African leaders and the willingness of citizens to embrace a

new model of governance. If the African leaders who are benefitting from the present system are not willing to change to the new system, then, there is nothing anyone can do about it. Also, the citizens must have an adequate understanding of how consensual democracy is to be practised in contemporary Africa. Knowing that one of the reasons majoritarian democracy has failed in Africa is the lack of adequate education by the majority of the citizens of the continent, consensual democracy can face a similar challenge.

Consensual Democracy as Best Alternative for Africa

Despite all the challenges identified by critics of consensual democracy as possible obstacles to the successful implementation of consensual democracy in contemporary African society, the system remains the most viable alternative to majoritarian democracy. Scholars like Barry Hallen (2019), Fayemi Kazeem (2010) and Olaonipekun Victor (2020) who participated in the debate on the challenges majoritarian democracy has brought to Africa agreed that the system of governance does not suit Africa. Some of the reasons posited by these scholars are that Africa is multi-ethnic by nature and a lot of minority ethnic groups are being marginalized with the use of majoritarian democracy. Secondly, the percentage of those who are educated is very low compared to the Western World where majoritarian democracy is being practised. Also, majoritarian democracy is too expensive for Africa because majority of its countries are underdeveloped.

The likes of Fayemi K. Ademola in his work, titled, “*A Critique of Consensual Democracy and Human Rights in Kwasi Wiredu's Philosophy*”, published in 2010; and Victor Olaonipekun in his work, titled, “*Democracy and Consensus in Traditional Africa: A*

Critique of Kwasi Wiredu”, published in 2020, suggested a modification of the majoritarian democracy to suit African nature and working towards making it work for the growth and development of the continent. Barry Hallen (2019) also advocated for a reconsideration of the consensual democracy. Hallen started his paper with a question as to why a system of governance foundational to the sub-Saharan African societies will be underestimated. He argued that consensual democracy has been underestimated because critics dismissed it on the basis that it is not realistic in contemporary complex African societies (Hallen, 2019:2).

Hallen posited that as much as the majoritarian democracy that is in practice in Africa is still problematic and everybody can attest to that, then there is a need for a reconsideration of consensual democracy. The need for a reconsideration of the system is based on the fact that; first, this has been the system in practice in pre-colonial Africa and no other person has proposed another system different and better than consensual democracy (Hallen, 2019:2). So, Hallen re-examined the idea of consensual democracy as the possible and more suitable alternative to majoritarian democracy. Secondly, according to Hallen, consensual democracy is an original African system of governance.

Lius Villoro supported the argument for a return to consensual democracy by pointing out that the system is similar to what is in practice in many indigenous American societies. According to him, the system of governance in the era before the European conquest of America is based on consensus. According to him, the reason why such a system was in practice was to preserve community relations

Lius, (2000). Lius gave an instance of the Tojolabal community in Mexico as described by Carlos Lenkersdorf, where everyone takes the stand and discusses issues, and at the end of the discussion, an old man will interpret and sum up the decisions that were arrived at. This is the same way it played out in pre-colonial African societies (Lius 2000). In the words of Lius, the old man must be wise and of good judgment, and will always use the word 'we' throughout his conversation (Lius 2000). Lius confirmed that the idea of the old form of decision-making suggested by Wiredu to Africa has re-emerged in some countries within Latin America, such as Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Bolivia. So, if this is so in the countries mentioned above, it is worth discussing the return to consensual democracy in Africa (Lius, 2000).

Wiredu's suggestion of returning to the pre-colonial political system of consensual democracy is not a bad idea. African political philosophers see what Wiredu has done as a good thing and something worthy of commendation. Though, it was argued that the consensual democracy suggested by Wiredu, considering how it was practised in the pre-colonial Ashanti community of Ghana as a template, cannot work in contemporary Africa due to its complexity, rural-urban migration, civilisation, and many more. However, rather than condemning and discarding consensual democracy, it should be modified in a form that will make it work for complex contemporary African society. The modified consensual democracy is what is termed, “Neo-consensual Democracy” in this study. This new form of consensual democracy will take care of the shortcomings of the consensual democracy in terms of its application to the contemporary African societies.

Also, Neo-consensual democracy will address the issue of under-informed single-level analyses raised by Emmanuel I. Ani in his work, titled, “*Consensus and Majoritarian Democracies: Problems with Under-Informed Single-Level Analyses.*” Ani argues in the work that when thinking of ideas about how a society should be governed, it is unwise to completely ignore the applicability of the idea (Ani, 2021:109).

Conclusion

Kwasi Wiredu's critique of Western-style democracy and his alternative vision for Africa offers valuable insights into the ongoing discussions about governance and democracy on the continent. By emphasizing cultural relevance, ethical considerations, and local participation, Wiredu's ideas provide a foundation for reimagining African political systems. While challenges exist in implementing his vision, it remains a thought-provoking contribution to the quest for effective and meaningful governance in Africa.

The need for alternatives arises because majoritarian democracy can be pretty expensive, especially in countries with limited resources. It requires a lot of infrastructure and resources to hold elections and to support all the parties and candidates involved. The imposition of Western political structures can be viewed as a form of Neo-colonialism, where external powers dictate the political systems of African nations, ignoring their right to self-determination. Wiredu's ideas offer a comprehensive framework for reimagining African political systems. Consensual democracy could be much less costly since it does not require the same level of infrastructure or resources. Very importantly, also, consensual democracy could be more inclusive since everyone's view is heard and considered, not just that

of the majority. In a consensual democracy, a small group of people could hold up the decision-making process if they refuse to consent. This could lead to a situation where the majority is held hostage by the minority. Consensual democracy is more compatible with African values and culture. It is also a practical way to avoid the problems of majoritarianism and factionalism that can plague representative democracies.

However, implementing the consensual democracy comes with considerable challenges. However, despite the challenges, it remains a thought-provoking and vital contribution to the discourse on governance and democracy in Africa. Further research and sustained dialogues are necessary to explore the practicability and feasibility of Wiredu's proposals in addressing Africa's unique political challenges. For example, further research on the practicability and feasibility of Wiredu's proposal is what has led to 'Neo-consensual Democracy', which is a new form of consensual democracy that will provide the solution to the challenges of the system. Neo-consensual democracy is a modified fashion of consensual democracy which is meant to take care of the loopholes identified in the consensual democracy by the critics of the system. Neo-consensual democracy will align with the new settings of contemporary Africa where we do not have a family or lineage head, and where there is no more village council that will sit under trees to deliberate. Some elements of the majoritarian democracy such as voting will also be present in the neo-consensual democracy because of the numbers of people involved and to reach compromise. These and many others will help to put African in its best form in term of politics and economy.

References

- Ahiaveh David Korbla (2021), A Critical Study of Kwasi Wiredu's Consensual Democracy, University of Cape Coast, <https://ir.ucc.edu.gh/xmlui>
- Ani, E. I. (2021), "Consensus and Majoritarian Democracies: Problems with Under-Informed Single-Level Analyses", *Human Affairs* 31, 109–124, Institute for Research in Social Communication, Slovak Academy of Sciences
- Hallen, B. (2019), "Reconsidering the Case for Consensual Governance in Africa", *Second Order: An African Journal of Philosophy* (New Series) Volume III, Number 1, 1–22.
- Fayemi, A. K. (2010), "A Critique of Consensual Democracy and Human Rights in Kwasi Wiredu's Philosophy", *LUMINA*, Vol. 2, No. 1, ISSN 2094-1188.
- Luis, V. (2000), "On Consensual Democracy Concerning Kwasi Wiredu's Ideas", *Forum for Intercultural Philosophy* 2 Online: <http://them.polylog.org/2/fv1-en.htm> ISSN 1616-2943
- Olanipekun, V. (2020), "Democracy and Consensus in Traditional Africa: A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu", *Inkanyiso, Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 12(1).
- Wiredu, K. (1996). *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Wiredu, K. (1995), "Democracy and Consensus in African Traditional Politics: A Plea for A Non-Party Polity", *The Centennial Review*, Vol. 39, No. 1 (Winter 1995), pp. 53 - 64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23739547>.