

Can there be democracy without good governance?

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Democracy is a system of governance where people elect their representatives and play a participatory role in the governance system. While democracy as a system of government is not flawless, it is regarded as the best system for good governance to be birthed and sustained. American Political Scientist, Larry Diamond, has identified the following four key elements of democracy:

“Democracy consists of four key elements; a political system for choosing and replacing the government through free and fair elections; the active participation of the people, as citizens, in politics and civic life; protection of the Human Rights of all citizens; and the rule of law, in which the laws and procedures apply equally to all citizens.”

It is assumed that Democracy present with all the elements identified by Larry should breed good governance. The United Nations has measured ‘Good Governance’ by eight factors: *Participation; Rule of law; Transparency; Consensus Oriented; Equity and Inclusiveness; Effectiveness; Efficiency and Accountability*. In essence, Democracy is not an event, it is a continuous process cultivated towards attaining the following attributes, in order to produce good governance.

Participation: For democracy to yield good governance, the people must participate in the governance process. Citizens’ participation should not be limited to electoral processes, it should go all the way into governance and legislative processes etc. Government must endeavour to invite citizens’ participation and consult them especially on major policy positions and decisions.

Rule of Law: Democracy cannot thrive outside a rule of law system since it is the latter that guarantees democracy. In essence, democracy must ensure that the Constitution of a nation is supreme and all elected officials and the citizenry respect and obey it. A rule of law system ensures that laws and policies apply to all manner of persons and judicial redress mechanisms are available to all.

Without a functional rule of law, society would be too chaotic for democracy to exist.

Transparency: Democracy is deemed the most transparent system of government. This is so because the processes, procedures, policies, laws and decisions of elected officials or government should be done in a manner that is transparent, open to criticism and objection. Right to access information is a key element of the transparency character of democracy.

Consensus-oriented: Democracy is about majority and that is not only limited to the outcome of the ballot processes. It applies extensively to how the governance process is structured, how laws and policies are formulated, and how governance decisions are not only made but also implemented. Democracy caters for majority protection against any tyranny of the few—elected leaders.

Equity and inclusiveness: Democracy is about equality and equity. It ensures that policies, laws and decisions apply equitably without discrimination on the grounds of sex, gender, education, religion, nationality, race and/or political belief or persuasion. In a democracy, there are neither super-citizens nor lesser citizens. Democracy is all inclusive, every individual, including opposition groups or critical voices, are entitled to be included in the governance process.

Effectiveness: Democracy is an effective and strong system of government. It ensures that every facet of society works together towards a common good. Effectiveness in democracy means that the institutions of government are working independently and are not subject to the control and direction of political interests.

Efficiency: Democracy is designed to produce development. If it does not lead to economic development and political growth, it isn't democracy. Democracy as an efficient system of government ensures that decisions, policies and laws produce the maximum effect thereby engendering growth and development. Democracy is inconsistent with development stagnation.

Accountability: Democracy ensures that the people always have the power to scrutinize their leaders. Accountability is the power of the people to always regulate their leaders and bring them to book for any abuse of legitimate authority. Accountability is the check that is placed on democratic power by the people.

Absent any or all of these eight elements, a system of government cannot be characterised as democratic and certainly good governance would not exist. Democracy is not only the holding of regular, free and fair elections every five years, it is a system of government that upholds all eight elements of good governance. If there is no good governance in a system of government, it cannot be truly called a democracy. This is why political scientists have introduced varying degrees of democracy such as “fragile democracies; weak democracies; emerging democracies; third-world democracies,” to avoid omitting describing the system as totally non-democratic.

Sierra Leone is a democracy by virtue of Section 5 of the Constitution of Sierra Leone (Act No.6) of 1991 which provides for a democratic system of government. But democracy as a word or provision in a Constitution does not give birth to good governance. Democracy has to be harnessed to produce good governance. In effect, democracy does not stop at the ballot box, it must nurture the fruits of good governance and a thriving space for citizens’ participation throughout the governance process.

Democracy is not assured merely on paper. It is secured by constant demands for adherence to its ideals, resistance against bad governance and decisive actions for good leadership. Great democracies are not born. They are made by each determined generation.