

## **AFRICAN UNION CHARTER ON DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE - A ROAD MAP FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE RULE OF LAW AND CONFLICT PREVENTION IN AFRICA**

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*Abstract:* In this paper, the author deals extensively with the analysis of the solutions reached in the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) as an operational instrument of the African Union (AU), by which this regional organization for the first time precisely defines the road map for building democracy in Africa, especially in the areas of rule of law and prevention of conflicts. As the African continent has long been burdened by both international and internal armed conflicts, which by their nature are extremely cruel and accompanied by the commission of various types of war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide, and organized crime, the AU adopted the ACDEG in order to establish the rule of law by introducing and strengthening democratic institutions and conducting democratic elections in African countries to protect the human rights and fundamental freedoms of their citizens. More recently, cases of unconstitutional changes such as the failed coup in Niger and illegitimate takeovers in Tunisia, Sudan, Mali, and Guinea point to negative trends in the rule of law in Africa. Considering these negative developments, the author took upon himself the task of exhaustively examining the adequacy of the ACDEG as a multilateral legal instrument adopted by the largest African regional organization in order to prevent conflicts in Africa. All the more so, because this legal instrument, in its application, managed to lead to democratic governance

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in some African countries. On the other hand, its effect remained extremely limited. The author, therefore, believes that the possibilities of further action by the AU should be examined. All the more so because it would be possible to increase the effectiveness of ACDEG in practice through concrete action plans on the already established road map. In this sense, the author points to concrete challenges, but he also gives recommendations for overcoming them.

*Keywords:* ACDEG, conflicts in Africa, election, Good governance, impact

## INTRODUCTION

In contradistinction to customarily bleak accounts, Africa has undergone significant changes that have resulted to some extent in improvements in its governance landscape over the past decade (Aneme & Lamikanra, 2018). It is not an exaggeration that the African Union (AU) policy on dealing with unconstitutional changes of government has generated countless debates, and a large amount of research and many papers have been published on the topic (Djinnit, 2021). According to Djinnit: “From the early 1990s until the adoption of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Government (ACDEG) in 2007, the continental organization produced a vast number of policy documents and normative frameworks related to peace and security, economic and political governance. The challenge lay in the implementation of these policies” (Djinnit, 2021). Yet, the continent is also still marked by civil wars (for example in South Sudan and Libya), *coups d’etat* (for example in Egypt and Zimbabwe), serious human rights violations (for example in Sudan and Eritrea) and election-related violence (for example in Kenya and the Democratic Republic of the Congo) (Stephan, 2016). The African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) is a unique instrument aimed at addressing these challenges so as to, in the words of its preamble, “deepen and consolidate the rule of law, peace, security, and development”.<sup>1</sup> At the just concluded AU’s 35<sup>th</sup> Meeting in Ethiopia in February 2022, African Heads of States and Governments were still lamenting the state of military takeover of governments in about six AU countries. Four member states of the AU have been suspended since 2021 as a result of unconstitutional changes of government. Most recently, in Burkina Faso, where soldiers overthrew President Christian Kabore. At

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<sup>1</sup> Preamble to the ACDEG, 2007.

the sideline meeting with Mohammed Adow, a correspondent of *Al Jazeera* international network news, and Solomon Dersso, founder of the AU-focused Amani Africa Think-tank, especially concerning the jubilation of the citizens of the area where the military has taken over. Dersso was of the view that the people's jubilation, though wrong, was a result of not enjoying the dividends of civilian rule. He was, however, of the view that a military takeover of a government will not and cannot solve the continental problems (Solomon Dersso's interview with Mohammed Adow, a correspondent of *Al Jazeera* news, February 5; Ogundele, 2022).<sup>2</sup> It was also alleged that not suspending Chad when the military council took over the government after the death of former president Idriss Deby in April 2021, was like playing a double game. Having initially envisaged a declaration, the African Union (AU) Commission persuaded the Executive Council to authorize the development of a legally binding treaty based on the collective commitments already made by the AU member states in the domains of elections, democracy, and governance (Draft AU Declaration on Elections, Democracy and Governance, 2003, February 20; Decision of the Meeting of Experts on Elections, 2004). The AU Commission's arguments were based on consolidation logic and declaration fatigue. Invoking the advantage of bringing all these commitments together in one text, as well as considering "that the Organization had already adopted many Declarations and Decisions on the same issue", the AU Commission recommended, "a more binding text in the form of a Charter rather than yet another declaration" (Report of the Interim Chairperson on the Proceedings of the African Conference on Elections, 2003; Report on the Meeting of Government Experts on the Documents from the Pretoria Conference on Elections, 2004).

According to Onditi and Okoth (2016, 19), a key problem with the Constitutive Act of the African Union is that it fails to articulate the legal status of AU decisions. Nevertheless, the Assembly's Rules of Procedure provide that regulations and directives are legally binding while declarations and recommendations remain merely persuasive. Since its adoption in 2007 and subsequent entry into force in 2012, the ACDEG has generated considerable interest from scholars and practitioners (Matlosa, 2008; Glen, 2012). Although scholars largely agreed on the ACDEG's potential, many were skeptical about its implementation and anticipated

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<sup>2</sup> Raila Odinga, the AU Infrastructural Development Officer, was also of the view that African countries are still lacking so many infrastructures for development.

effects (Kane, 2008; Saungweme, 2007). The academic literature in the fields of both law and political science has increasingly paid attention to the ACDEG's role in dealing with "unconstitutional changes of governments" and, in particular, military coups *d'état* (Tieku, 2009). There is also a growing scholarly interest in the role of the AU in addressing serious democratic governance challenges related to popular uprisings and the manipulation of presidential term limits (Omorogbe, 2011; Souaré, 2014). Yet, there is a dearth of literature that considers the implementation of the ACDEG in a broader, holistic sense (Dersso, 2019). The African Charter recognizes a number of rights that later found their way into the ACDEG. The right to participate in government is undoubtedly of greatest relevance to the core ideas behind the ACDEG. The ACDEG, to a large extent, can be described as an overall elaboration of this right by setting more detailed conditions for its fulfillment. Other important rights that found their way into the ACDEG include the rights to freedom from discrimination,<sup>3</sup> equality before the law and equal protection of the law,<sup>4</sup> freedom of expression,<sup>5</sup> education,<sup>6</sup> a satisfactory environment,<sup>7</sup> and peace and security (Adeyeye, 2018; Adeyeye & Atidoga, 2021).<sup>8</sup> While ideas were already circulating among non-governmental organizations (NGOs), lawyers, judges, and scholars from various African countries to establish a judicial body to enforce human rights in the early 1960s, they were rejected by the lead drafters during the preparation of the African Charter in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Journal International Commission of Jurists, 1961).

### CONCEPTUAL CLASSIFICATION

For a better understanding of this topic, it is apt to conceptualize the meaning of the subject matter. According to Black's Law Dictionary, democracy is defined as "that form of government in which sovereign power resides in and is exercised by the whole of free citizens directly or

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<sup>3</sup> African Charter, Article 2. ACDEG, Article 8.

<sup>4</sup> African Charter, Article 3. ACDEG, Article 10(3).

<sup>5</sup> African Charter, Article 9. ACDEG, Article 27(8).

<sup>6</sup> African Charter, Article 17. ACDEG, Article 43.

<sup>7</sup> African Charter, Article 24. ACDEG, Article 42.

<sup>8</sup> African Charter, Article 23. ACDEG, Article 38.

indirectly through a system of representation, as distinguished from a monarchy, aristocracy, or oligarchy” (Black, 1978, p. 388). In the same dictionary, election is defined as “the selection of one person in a state, corporation, or society; with respect to the choice of a person to fill a public office or the decision of a particular public question or public policy, the term means in ordinary usage re-expansion by a vote of the will of the people or a somewhat numerous body of electors” (*Ibid.*, p. 465). On the other hand, the Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines governance as “the activities of governing a country or controlling a company or organization; the way in which a country is governed or a company or an institution is controlled” (Hornby, 2000). It could be discerned that the subject matter means popular participation in the affairs of the state in government. It does not admit to arbitrary rule or the use of power. It allows the people to decide who rules them, and the ruler is answerable to the electorate for the dividend of democracy. What is happening in most African nations is quite the opposite of this. Elections are rigged in favor of certain candidates, which later leads to the military takeover of power or a popular uprising of the people against the government.

### **CONFLICT SITUATION IN AFRICA**

No doubt, in every country in the world, groups or factions whose interests may not be in line with those of the country as a whole certainly exist. Indeed, in Africa, one of the most important constraints to democratic consolidation is the violent struggle by various factions, many of which are actually ethno-cultural groups, to capture, through elections or other means, the apparatus of government. To combat the abuse of the rights of minorities by majorities, that is, to minimize majoritarian tyranny, a country can create a governmental system in which the people are sovereign but government power and the exercise of it is limited by the constitution, which includes provisions to explicitly protect individual rights, to instill separation of powers through checks and balances, and to enshrine popular sovereignty through elections. However, for such a constitutional democracy to survive and flourish, it must have a “virtuous”, robust, and politically active public as well as political elites dedicated to maintaining the country’s constitutional institutions (Murungi & Gallinetti, 2010). According to the African Center for Strategic Studies, since 2015, leaders of 13 African countries have “evaded or overseen the further weakening of term limit restrictions that had been in place” (Siegle & Cook, 2021). Some of these are Algeria, the Comoros,

Guinea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), South Sudan, and Uganda. Also, Alassane Ouattara, who has been president of Côte d'Ivoire since 2011 and who was seemingly barred from standing for the presidency in the election cycle by the constitution's two-term limit, argued in August 2020 that his first two mandates do not count because the limits were created by the constitution that was adopted in 2016, which effectively reset the clock. Although he initially declined to run again, the untimely death of his party's chosen candidate created a vacuum in which he decided to stand again. These constitutional coups weaken the role of elections as a democratizing tool. Worse, in some countries (Cameroon or The Gambia, for instance), this circumvention of term limits has contributed significantly to the rise of violent and destructive mobilization by marginalized ethno-cultural groups (Lolette, 2005). Despite these setbacks, the trend is not unidirectional. Several African countries have strengthened or upheld term limits since 2015. These include Benin, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, and the Seychelles. They are part of a group of 21 African countries that continue to uphold term limits. Moreover, the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso have held or will hold constitutional referendums to institute term limits. There is a notable regional variation in the upholding of term limits. Countries in southern and western Africa have demonstrated the greatest adherence to these norms, while swathes of northern, central, and the Horn of Africa have failed to do so (*Ibidem*). The lack of effective term limits has resulted in Africa having 10 leaders who have ruled for over 20 years and two family dynasties that have been in power for more than 50 years. Some of these are Gabon, where the Bongo dynasty has ruled for 53 years; Equatorial Guinea, where Teodoro Obiang has ruled for 41 years; Cameroon, where Paul Biya has ruled for 38 years; Uganda, where Yoweri Museveni has ruled for 34 years; and Rwanda, where Paul Kagame has ruled for 20 years. This erosion of term limits is a setback for good governance in Africa: Leaders in countries with term limits have been in office, on average, for 3 years. Those that have modified or eliminated term limits have been in power for a median of 12 years. Recent years have also seen the ouster of long-ruling African leaders by their erstwhile political allies, resulting in a continuation of the existing power structure. If these regimes, Algeria, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, and Zimbabwe are included, then the median time in office for countries without term limits jumps to 19 years. All eight of the African countries facing civil conflict (excluding insurgencies by militant Islamist groups) are those without term limits.

Of the 10 African countries that are the largest source of Africa's 32 million refugees and internally displaced populations, 7 are countries lacking term limits (*Ibidem*).

### **SOME LANDMARKS PROVISIONS OF THE ACDEG**

In comparison with the OAU and AU instruments, the ACDEG is unique in at least six ways. First, the ACDEG is the first AU instrument that involves all the AU mechanisms in its implementation.<sup>9</sup> Second, it has its own provisions regarding sanctions that complement the AU sanctions regime found in other instruments and could strengthen compliance with the AU's norms and values and promote accountability. In this regard, a breach of the ACDEG could invite sanctions in terms of Article 46 of the Charter itself,<sup>10</sup> and Articles 23(2) and 30<sup>11</sup> of the AU Constitutive Act. Third, Article 8(2) of the ACDEG obligates state parties to "adopt legislative and administrative measures to guarantee the rights of women, ethnic minorities, migrants, people with disabilities, refugees and displaced persons, and other marginalized and vulnerable social groups".<sup>12</sup> This is the first AU instrument that seeks to address the challenges faced by "ethnic minorities, migrants, and marginalized and vulnerable social groups". Fourth, the Charter is the most significant instrument regarding elections in that it has sixteen provisions relating to elections. Fifth, uniquely, it is the only AU instrument that gives a legal basis, in its Article 37, to the concepts of sustainable development and human security through the NEPAD objectives and the UN Millennium

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<sup>9</sup> Notably, the AU Commission, the Pan-African Parliament, the Peace and Security Council, the ACtHPR, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the Committee on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, the Economic, Social and Cultural Council, and the regional economic communities (ACDEG, Article 45c).

<sup>10</sup> Article 46 provides that, "the Assembly and the Peace and Security Council shall determine the appropriate measures to be imposed on any State Party that violates this Charter".

<sup>11</sup> Article 30 stipulates that, "Governments which shall come to power through unconstitutional means shall not be allowed to participate in the activities of the Union".

<sup>12</sup> The ACDEG was adopted almost three years before the Kampala Convention on Internally Displaced Persons, 2009.

Development Goals.<sup>13</sup> Sixth, in terms of Article 25(5) of the Charter, “perpetrators of unconstitutional changes of government may also be tried before the competent court of the Union”. Hence the insertion of this crime into the “International Crimes Protocol” for the ACtHPR, adopted in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea, on June 27, 2014 (Protocol on Amendments to the Protocol on the Statute of the African Court of Justice and Human Rights, 2014). These provisions were included in response to the governance deficit on the continent and the challenge of the non-implementation of legal instruments by the member states, by recommitting states in clearer language to deal with these issues in an instrument that has a sanctions regime and is justifiable.

### SOME LACUNA IN THE ACDEG

As comprehensive as the ACDEG is, there are gaps. For example, the drafters missed an opportunity to make a link between terrorism and governance, even though terrorism is to some extent caused and/or aggravated by the democratic deficits, marginalization, bad governance, and lack of good electoral practices that the ACDEG seeks to address.<sup>14</sup> There is also no indication of what a culture of democracy in Articles 11, 12(2), and 29(2) means, and how or through what means this lofty objective will be achieved. If the intention was that this objective be achieved through, for example, “civic education in their educational curricula and development of appropriate programs and activities” (Article 12(4)), this should have been clearly stated. In the process of negotiating the ACDEG, a number of key issues and reservations were raised by the member states with regard to certain aspects of the draft charter, particularly those that states felt directly affected state sovereignty (Draft/Charter, 2006, June 9-10).<sup>15</sup> Some member states were concerned

<sup>13</sup> Article 37 obligates state parties to “pursue sustainable development and human security through the achievement of NEPAD objectives and the United Nations Millennium Development Goals”.

<sup>14</sup> The issue of terrorism was neither raised in the initial drafts nor by the delegates, perhaps because it is adequately addressed in the 1999 AU Convention on Preventing and Combating Terrorism, which entered into force on December 26, 2002.

<sup>15</sup> This section of the article is largely based on the author’s personal observations and notes on the negotiating process, as well as official documents of the various



about the concept of “democratic change of governments” contained in Article 2(3), as it stood, which referred to promoting “the holding of regular free and fair elections to institutionalize legitimate authority of representative government as well as democratic change of governments” as read together with Article 10(2).<sup>16</sup> They felt that a regular change of government does not necessarily translate into a democracy. Other states also expressed concerns about “political pluralism” in draft Article 2(6),<sup>17</sup> arguing that there was no evidence that democracy could only be assured through political pluralism. Questions were also raised about the meaning of “access to information, freedom of the press, and accountability in the management of public affairs”.<sup>18</sup>

### IMPACT OF THE ACDEG

Since the 1990s, there have been significant transformations in the political systems of many African countries. These institutional changes have resulted in, for example, the demise of the racially based apartheid system in the Republic of South Africa and the introduction of a nonracial democracy. Many civilian and military dictatorships have fallen, paving the way for the establishment of a rule-of-law-based governance system characterized by constitutionalism and constitutional government, including reforms such as term limits. Nevertheless, many of these countries still struggle to deepen and institutionalize democracy and deal effectively and fully with government impunity, particularly that which is associated with the abuse of executive power and the violation of

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meetings of senior officials, ministerial meetings, and the session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government at which the final text was formally considered and adopted.

<sup>16</sup> The current Article 10(2) provides: “States Parties shall ensure that the process of amendment or revision of their constitution reposes on national consensus, obtained if need be, through referendum”.

<sup>17</sup> Article 2(6) on objectives states: “(...), nurture, support and consolidate good governance by promoting democratic culture and practice, building and strengthening governance institutions and inculcating political pluralism and tolerance”.

<sup>18</sup> Article 2(10) was not amended and requires states to “foster citizen participation, transparency, access to information, freedom of the press and accountability in the management of public affairs”.

human rights (Becchetti, Conzo, & Romeo, 2013). Presidents that have changed their countries' constitutions to eliminate the two-term limit include Presidents Gnassingbe (Togo), Museveni (Uganda), Deby (Chad), Biya (Cameroon), Kagame (Rwanda), the late Nkurunziza (Burundi), and el-Sisi (Egypt), just to name a few. Changing the constitution to eliminate term and/or age limits just for presidents and allow the incumbent president to unconstitutionally extend his mandate has been referred to as a *constitutional coup*. It is important to note that relatively weak institutions and the absence of a democratic culture have facilitated the ability of incumbents to manipulate constitutions in the countries mentioned in this paragraph. The hope is that, as the level of democratic development improves in these countries, such constitutional coups will become a rarity (Guibert & Perez-Quiros, 2012).

### CHALLENGES OF THE ACDEG

Corruption is a challenge in many African countries, though it is particularly pernicious in countries without term limits. For countries that have modified or eliminated term limits, the median ranking on Transparency International's annual Corruption Perceptions Index is 134 out of 180 countries. This is 46 places lower than the average ranking for African countries that have adhered to term limits. Africa has 34 presidential elections scheduled between 2019 and 2021. In roughly one-third of these elections, the issue of leaders challenging term limits has been central. The often controversial means by which these leaders are extending their terms undermines the legitimacy that these electoral processes are intended to generate. The institutionalization of term limits in Africa is part of a reform effort started in the 1990s to address the legacy of over-concentrated power in the executive. Term limits are seen as an especially important element of checks and balances in Africa given the relative weakness of independent democratic institutions such as the legislature, judiciary, civil services, security forces, the media, the public protector and central bank.

### CONCLUSIONS

In Africa as elsewhere, free, fair, and credible elections help citizens build effective democratic institutions and provide a tool for guarding the government through regularly and peacefully replacing recalcitrant and

poorly performing political elites. However, if African countries are to use elections to consolidate and entrench democracy, they must make certain that incumbent leaders are not able to (a) change national constitutions to eliminate term and age limits for presidents (as noted above) and other protections that guard the president against various forms of opportunism (as currently taking place in Zambia); (b) mandate registration fees for candidates seeking to stand for political office, including the presidency, that are beyond the reach of many citizens; (c) interfere with freedom of the press in ways that make it very difficult for the press to check on the government, provide citizens information about elections, and serve as a platform for the opposition to bring their message to voters; and (d) use security forces to intimidate and strangle the opposition. The Freedom of Information Act in Nigeria is a cure for this. Genuine efforts must be made to ensure that all of a country's population groups, including but not limited to those that have historically been marginalized. For example, minority religious and ethnic groups are provided with the wherewithal to participate fully and effectively in elections. In other words, African countries need to make certain that elections are adjudged free, fair, and credible, not just by external observers but also by each country's citizens. In addition, the AU should formalize a practice in which perpetrators and collaborators of unconstitutional changes of government will not be allowed to stand for the following general elections. The institutional environment — one in which fundamental rights and liberties and political rights are guaranteed and protected and in which elections are held — is also critical for a successful democracy. Citizens' civil liberties and political rights must be guaranteed and protected. For example, citizens must be able to freely and peacefully protest or support government policies or decisions, including but not limited to those related to elections. In addition, where there is adequate protection for free speech and a free press, as well as freedom for the opposition to campaign unimpeded, citizens can form political organizations to compete for positions in government. Such political competition can contribute significantly to improving the quality of elections and more effectively entrenching constitutional democracy in all African countries.

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