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Assessing the Role of the African Union in Addressing Democratic Recession in Africa

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Abstract

Recent coups in Sub-Saharan Africa underscore a concerning trend of democratic backsliding, despite the institutional efforts of the African Union (AU). The existing continental and regional mechanisms designed to prevent unconstitutional government changes have proven largely ineffective. This article argues that the AU must critically reassess its convention on unconstitutional government changes to address its inherent shortcomings. Employing document analysis as the primary methodology, this study systematically evaluates the AU's mechanisms, aiming to enhance their

operational efficiency. A comprehensive assessment of the AU's successes and challenges will illuminate essential areas requiring strategic reform. This is because reinforcing the commitment to democratic governance among African states is crucial for the sustainability of democratic institutions. Achieving this necessitates the establishment of robust frameworks that promote democratic practices and ensure accountability at both regional and national levels.

Keywords: *African Union, Coups, Democratic recession, Election, Unconstitutional change of government.*

1. Introduction

Despite noticeable democratic changes and peaceful transitions of power over the past couple of decades in many African states, there has also been an obvious regression in participatory democracy on the continent since 2020. Africa has witnessed a significant democratic recession, which has implications for its quest for a lasting democratic process. Scholars have termed this phenomenon the ascendance of democratic recession in the continent (Fong, 2023). Diamond (2015) observed that the world has been experiencing a prolonged democratic recession since 2006. This is partly due to the unrestrained abuse of power by executives in their quest for ruling party hegemony and political dominance, which often leads to the erosion of freedom of expression, electoral fairness, civic space for dissent and opposition, and political pluralism (Jaramillo & Morsheimer, 2024). These issues pose significant challenges to the attainment of Africa's Agenda 2063.

We can analyze the challenges of democratic recession in Africa through the lens of institutionalism. Moravcsik (1997) suggests that international institutions, like the AU, can promote cooperation and stability, but their effectiveness depends on the commitment of member states to uphold supranational norms and principles. In Africa's case, the AU's efforts to curb democratic backsliding through initiatives like the Lomé Declaration illustrate how institutional frameworks can promote democratic consolidation. One of the subsections goes into further detail on how this theory explains the role of institutions like the AU in addressing democratic recession in Africa.

The African Union (AU), as the foremost institutional foundation for security, peace, and democratic governance in Africa, has made efforts to address democratic recession and rising threats to democratic consolidation through several key initiatives. For instance, the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (ACDEG) serves as

a guiding framework that promotes democratic principles and prevents unconstitutional changes of government (Ifedi & Uzogbado, 2021). This initiative reflects the AU's commitment to strengthening democracy and mitigating governance challenges across the continent. However, the AU has not been successful in meeting its goals. This could be due to its inability to connect its activities and work to ordinary Africans, hold Africa's corrupt leaders accountable for their abuse of power, give voice to the majority of Africans, improve intra-African trade that benefits all Africans, and provide impactful public goods and services valued by common citizens on the continent (Tieku, 2019). The institution has not limited the financial dependence on foreign donors from various countries on the continent, which has led to a lack of cooperation among African states and deepened the continent's vulnerability to foreign manipulation (Booker, 2018). This article explores the involvement of the AU in addressing the democratic deterioration of the African continent.

2. Democracy in Africa

Democracy is a key concept that has preoccupied the minds of scholars, analysts, and leaders in Africa on a daily basis (Mangu, 2014). Although many African governments declare themselves democratic, they often operate under civilian rule without adhering to core democratic principles such as accountability, transparency, and respect for citizens' rights. Civilian rule, where leaders are not military officials, does not inherently equate to democratic governance (Gruber, 2023). The absence of genuine democratic practices, such as free and fair elections, separation of powers, and a commitment to human rights, underscores the gap between nominally civilian-led governments and the deeper democratic structures needed for democratic consolidation (Robinson et al., 2022). Mangu (2007) observed that dictators equally favor democracy, a paradox that has persisted for millennia. As Zainawa (2021) and Bauhr and Grimes (2021) opined, democracy involves regular, free elections in which political parties compete to create the government, the right of almost all adults to vote, and a variety of political and civil rights. Simply put, democracy is competitive, multiparty, and electoral.

Conversely, Bloh (2023) and Mbaegu (2023) have demonstrated that the continental democratic average has been decreasing in the region due to declining institutional trust and election administration issues. Furthermore, the failure of governments to develop economic opportunities that will improve citizens' lives has increasingly limited

democratic consolidation in Africa. Bagnetto (2023) and The Economist (2023) observed that austerity measures, economic and fiscal crises, and rising debt are increasingly threatening democracy on the continent. Despite the competition among the US, UK, Russia, China, and France for African influence and economic and security interests, violence in the region is rising. With these obstacles, the continent will struggle to reap democracy's benefits.

Similarly, the continent's position on democratic performance indices is equally low (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2024). Cape Verde and Ghana are Africa's only top-50 representatives, with South Africa following in 54th place. Burkina Faso, Tunisia, and Guinea-Bissau declined the most in 2021–2022. Kenya improved the most in rankings; however, the recent crackdown on protesters by state actors may affect its future ranking (Muia, 2024). Declines in national representation typically follow one of two patterns. First, several nations have seen coups, illegal regime changes, and other “undefined transitions” with unknown consequences. Guinea, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Sudan have no representation scores. In 2023, Niger and Gabon experienced coups, continuing the wave but not appearing in democratic performance indices. Second, Benin, Comoros, Mauritius, and Tunisia have seen democratic declines. Government actions and new legislation have reduced political competition, resulting in a decrease in credible elections and a reduction in representation scores (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2024).

Although these losses are significant, all four countries still have credible elections above the continental norm. The continental average for credible elections is alarmingly low (0.38). Other long-standing issues with elected governance beyond elections persisted in 2022 and 2023. Côte d'Ivoire, Comoros, Guinea, and Togo have dodged presidential term limits in the last five years (Sampson, 2023). Such efforts harm democracy's commitment to leadership alternation, even if they withstand constitutional challenges (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2024).

3. Institutional Theory and the African Union

This study adopts the institutional perspective in international relations, specifically drawing from Andrew Moravcsik's research to examine the African Union's involvement in combating the decline of democracy in Africa. In international relations, institutionalism highlights the importance of international organizations and institutions in shaping

state actions, promoting collaboration, and reducing conflicts. As stated by Moravcsik (1997), institutions create the basic structure in which states function, making sure that cooperation among states is possible and long-lasting, even in a competitive global environment. Unlike realism, which prioritizes self-interest and state rivalry, institutionalism highlights the role of international institutions in fostering cooperation among states by minimizing uncertainties, encouraging transparency, and fostering trust among member states.

In the African setting, the African Union (AU) functions as a regional organization aiming to improve political stability and advance democratic governance. By utilizing its tools, the AU is able to establish an environment that promotes peace, security, and collaboration among its member nations. Through the establishment of consistent regulations and standards, the AU creates a space for member states to collaborate on shared objectives like resolving conflicts and strengthening democracy. This paper explores how effective the AU has been in carrying out this role, especially amidst the ongoing democratic decline in numerous African countries. One of the central tenets of institutionalism is the idea that international institutions facilitate cooperation by providing information, reducing transaction costs, enhancing credibility, and fostering interdependence. Utilizing these principles to analyze the African Union's efforts in tackling the decline of democracy in Africa highlights accomplishments and deficiencies.

First, in terms of decreasing transaction costs, the African Union has made significant advancements in encouraging economic integration among its member countries. Initiatives like the Africa Economic Community (AEC), formed as per the Abuja Treaty, and the Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) are important achievements in this respect. These agreements aim to create a seamless and mutually beneficial framework for trade and economic cooperation among African countries, thereby reducing barriers to trade and investment. Through promoting trade integration, the AU aids in cutting down expenses linked to cross-border business transactions, ultimately fostering economic growth, which can act as a basis for democratic stability. Despite the presence of these agreements, the AU has encountered difficulties in effectively executing these programs, and the economic collaboration has not always led to the reinforcement of democratic systems.

Second, the African Union takes a proactive stance in communicating with member countries to keep them informed and engaged. The information-sharing systems in the AU have helped the

organization to obtain global assistance, improve collaboration, and manage crises, such as democratic governance threats. The AU relies on information to increase awareness about governance issues in all member states, promoting transparency and accountability. Yet, there are still deficiencies in ensuring that this information leads to tangible measures to prevent democratic decline.

Third, the African Union faces significant challenges regarding credibility and commitment. Institutionalism suggests that organizations can establish trust among states by promoting trustworthy agreements, but the AU's credibility has suffered due to its failure to consistently enforce adherence to democratic standards. This is partly because the AU is intergovernmental, allowing member states to keep sovereignty and decision-making power. The AU depends on the agreement of its member states to make decisions collectively as an intergovernmental organization. This framework limits the AU's ability to hold member states accountable for democratic shortcomings, as it lacks the authority to enforce sanctions or mandate adherence. So, the question arises: Can a state-created organization effectively monitor those same states? This paradox highlights the challenges of African regionalism, as the states the AU seeks to govern limit its ability to uphold democratic values.

Finally, the core idea of institutionalist theory is the principle of interdependence, which implies that states operate independently yet rely on each other for shared advantages. The African Union aims to foster greater interconnectedness among its members by creating a framework that bolsters democratic rule through collaboration in politics and economics. Yet, in reality, the AU has faced difficulties in attaining such a high level of interdependence. The AU's influence is more advisory than authoritative due to the organization's limited enforcement mechanisms and member states' reluctance to give up authority. This has put the AU in a situation where it frequently doesn't have the political influence needed to effectively tackle democratic decline.

Generally, the intergovernmental framework of the African Union limits its capacity to uphold democratic standards, despite its significant progress in encouraging economic integration and facilitating information sharing. The AU's ability to combat the democratic decline in Africa will rely on its ability to boost its credibility, promote greater unity among member states, and establish more effective methods for enforcing adherence to democratic values. According to Andrew Moravcsik (1997), an institution's success depends on its capacity to minimize uncertainties, encourage collaboration, and establish trust. In order for the AU to harness this potential completely, it needs to strike a

careful balance between honoring state sovereignty and upholding the shared norms that support democratic governance in Africa.

4. Materials and Methods

We adopted documentary analysis as exploratory research to examine the role of the African Union (AU) in addressing the democratic recession in Africa. We primarily collected data from secondary sources such as scholarly works, AU reports, treaties, resolutions, policy documents, and newspaper reports and articles. The study looked at important papers like the African Union Constitutive Act and the Lomé Declaration on unconstitutional changes of government, as well as the Abuja Treaty and the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) to look at trade integration mechanisms. It also looked at reports from the Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (EISA) and election observation missions, as well as academic papers that helped shape the research's theoretical perspective.

Additionally, we conducted a thematic analysis to identify recurring themes related to democratic governance, AU interventions, and the challenges of sustaining democratic norms in Africa. The analysis involved identifying patterns in AU intervention strategies, including preventive diplomacy, election observation missions, and peacebuilding initiatives. We are also examining the successes and limitations of the AU's role in specific case studies, such as Nigeria, Zambia, Lesotho, Gambia, and Côte d'Ivoire. Furthermore, we evaluated the institutional mechanisms, like the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC), and its endeavors to thwart unconstitutional governmental transitions, along with trade agreements designed to promote stability via economic collaboration.

A notable limitation of this study lies in its reliance on secondary data, which restricts access to primary source insights. Consequently, publicly available reports and documents constrain the scope of the analysis, potentially failing to fully capture the internal dynamics of AU operations or the nuanced perspectives of local stakeholders. To mitigate this, the study cross-referenced findings with relevant case studies and reports from similar contexts, enhancing the robustness of the analysis. However, we acknowledge that this approach cannot fully replicate the depth of primary source data.

5. The African Union and Efforts for Regional Norms

The African Union (AU) serves as the umbrella organization for regional integration in Africa, with key objectives outlined in the African Union Constitutive Act. These objectives include promoting economic integration, achieving political unity, enhancing Africa's global representation, and fostering security cooperation (African Union Constitutive Act, 2000). Tieku (2017) characterizes the African Union (AU) as a tripartite entity, comprising governments, international bureaucrats, and outsiders. Tieku's book provides a three-dimensional framework for understanding the AU, which he describes as intergovernmental, supranational, and "outsiders." The AU outsiders comprise academics, think tanks, independent commissions, global civil society, and independent consultants.

Historically, the African Union (AU) is rooted in the legacy of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), founded in 1963 as a platform for cooperation among African states. The primary focus of the OAU was to support decolonization and safeguard the sovereignty of newly independent African nations. However, as the challenges facing Africa evolved, so too did the vision for continental unity. In 2001, the OAU transitioned into the AU, reflecting a shift toward a more integrated and proactive framework that emphasized economic development, political unity, and security cooperation across the continent. The AU represents a 21st-century form of Pan-Africanism, distinct from the race-centric ideology of earlier movements. As noted by Appiah (2017), the AU is cosmopolitan in its foreign policy, emphasizing Africa's role in global affairs rather than focusing solely on racial solidarity. According to Matthew, this 'new pan-Africanism' advocates for Africa to emerge as a united and influential entity on the world stage, capable of setting its own agenda.

The AU's version of Pan-Africanism moves beyond the 'victimhood mindset' often associated with earlier Pan-Africanist movements that emphasized colonial grievances. Instead, it calls for African-led solutions and a departure from dependency on external support. Ghanaian President Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo embodies this perspective, arguing for an end to Africa's reliance on foreign aid and for policies focused on self-reliance in the 21st century. Asiedu (2018) further underscores this shift by characterizing the new Pan-Africanism as 'human-centered,' which contrasts with the OAU's emphasis on institutionalizing statehood and decolonization. Tieku (2019) adds that this contemporary Pan-Africanism extends beyond traditional

sovereignty to prioritize human security and the accountability of African governments.

6. Democratic recession and the African Union's responses

Democracy has been steadily declining throughout Africa. In explaining this decline, the Global State of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) (2023) stated that electoral processes and practices in Africa have failed to meet continental and international norms and thereby hinder accountability for political leaders. Opalo (2022) supports this view when he observes that there is a wide disparity between elections and voters' lived experiences. More so, the failure of democratic politics to enhance the living standards of people has occasioned constant demand for political leadership change, which is common in Africa (Arogbofa, 2022).

The Electoral Institute for Sustainable Democracy in Africa (2024) acknowledges significant strides in African democracy over the past 30 years, reinforced by the African Union's Political Affairs, Peace, and Security (PAPS) initiatives. These efforts document initiatives to bolster democratic values, monitor elections, and fortify governance across the continent (PAPS, 2021, 2023). Multiparty systems have become commonplace since the 1990s, with over fifteen elections held annually across Africa. Countries like Nigeria, the Seychelles, and Lesotho have experienced relatively stable electoral transitions from 2002 to 2022, although many elections remain fraught with state manipulation and sporadic violence. The 2023 elections in Nigeria, for example, led to numerous post-election litigations (Nkannebe, 2023; Crisis Group, 2023; Suleiman et al., 2023), illustrating the prevalence of contentious electoral climates where undue influence can alter outcomes. Such instances demonstrate how state actors and powerful groups sometimes influence elections, highlighting ongoing democratic challenges.

The July 2000 Lomé Declaration by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) condemned military coups and established a framework to sanction regimes that came to power through such means. While this declaration may have contributed to a decline in the overall number of successful coups across the continent, it has not entirely eradicated them. Between 1952 and 2012, Africa experienced many successful military coups (Souaré, 2014). However, the effectiveness of the Lomé Declaration remains debatable, as several countries continue to witness military takeovers. For instance, countries like Sudan, Niger, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Mali have experienced numerous military coups and

counter-coups in recent years. Sudan alone has endured seven successful coups since gaining independence, with the most recent ones in 2019 and 2021 (Ayferam, 2023). From 2012 to 2023, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Egypt, Guinea-Bissau, Gabon, Niger, Mali, Sudan, and Chad collectively experienced more than ten military coups and counter-coups (Gerenge, 2023). These examples demonstrate that while the Lomé Declaration marked an important step towards discouraging unconstitutional changes of government, the challenge of military intervention in politics persists in many African nations.

Armed conflicts and violent extremism on the continent, particularly in the Horn of Africa, Lake Chad Basin, and the Sahel, have equally obstructed democratic consolidation (Booker, 2018; Tekl, 2011). South Sudan, Somalia, and Mali have had their elections postponed due to instability, violence, and terrorist activities. The Corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic has equally exacerbated the inadequacies in Africa's democratic governance, which has hugely impacted socio-economic activities, critical institutions, and governance processes negatively (Theonu, Asongu, Agbutun, and Ifelunini, 2022).

In an attempt to execute regulations during the lockdown, several countries implemented emergency legislation and prioritized public health, which sometimes resulted in human rights breaches. Gerenge (2020) observed that the first country to undergo a military coup in Africa during the COVID-19 period is Mali, after a highly contentious legislative election in the country. The reelection of President Alpha Conde for a third term in the 2020 Guinean presidential elections, following a highly contested constitutional referendum that removed presidential term limits, equally paved the way for a military takeover in the country.

7. The African Union and Challenges of Democratic Recession

The prevalence of unlawful government changes in Africa has devalued elections as the primary means of bringing about political change. Sadly, this unlawful change of government seems to be receiving widespread acceptance (Ndiloseh & Hudson, 2022). Asunka (2023) observed that 53% of 28 African countries believe soldiers should engage in politics when elected politicians abuse their power, while 43% believe troops should never engage in politics.

Despite the AU's commitment to improving the electoral systems of member states, elections in Africa continue to be vulnerable to democratic recession. The African Union (AU) recognized numerous

threats to democracy in the 2022 Accra Declaration, which outlined the complex challenges Africa confronts, such as transnational organized crime, security threats, and governance gaps. These obstacles obstruct regional and continental attempts to address peace and security, socio-economic challenges, and unconstitutional government changes.

The AU's election support highlights several obstacles to enhancing democratic standards and reversing the democratic recession. This equally applies to the AU's interventions in conflict resolution, humanitarian aid, and human rights. The institutional nature of the commission also contributes to its problems, as it lacks the necessary political will to conduct timely and regular democratic elections in line with shared values. The lack of punishments for fraudulent elections by the AU has worsened the situation. The primacy of sovereignty in AU-member state relations places the locus of political will on member state actors to follow democratic norms.

Two major barriers confront the AU: its relationship with each sovereign member state and its involvement in elections, where the people of the member states exercise their sovereignty and localize their norms. For instance, when Guinea held its constitutional referendum in March 2020 to extend President Alpha Condé's tenure, many people boycotted the referendum and legislative elections because of violence. But the Condé regime thought that "sovereign" popular movements could be used to legitimize the continuation of the regime by (re)constructing legal processes as described by AU normative instruments. Furthermore, Guinea encountered the contextual challenges posed by the AU during its violent electoral processes in 2020, a situation reminiscent of previous instances in Côte d'Ivoire in 2020, Comoros in 2019, the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2018, and Burundi in 2015 (Gerenge, 2023).

Although numerous factors have hindered its support, the AU has supported post-electoral reform procedures that foster democratic change and consolidation in member states. Financial and human resource constraints limit institutional capability in Africa, which has the most national elections. Despite suggestions from the AU election observation mission, member states continue to conduct reforms independently, which hinders the development of a democratic culture

8. The African Union's Response to Democratic Recession

The African Union (AU) has taken various measures to manage democratic decline in Africa. The AU has finalized a fundamental

guideline on national constitutional changes. It is in that sense that more than half of the AU's member states have completed or launched constitutional amendment processes (Grant & Melanie, 2017). Scholars and policy analysts have criticized many of the amendments as a "coup," "unconstitutional," "illegitimate," "undemocratic," or "regressive," despite the fact that some have legitimately opened political spaces and enriched democratic governance (Adem, 2019).

Furthermore, the AU, on invitation, sends an election observation mission to virtually every member state that is having legislative and presidential elections. According to Chapter 7 of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (2007), the AU's election observation mission promotes accountable, peaceful, transparent, fair, and inclusive democratic elections. The AU deploys short- and long-term observation missions, along with pre-election missions, to evaluate electoral context and preparedness. The AU has sent four hundred and twenty-three (423) election observers since the return of multi-party elections in Africa in 1989 and thereafter. The AU has conducted over 200 election observation missions for a period of twenty years, specifically 2002 to 2022.

The AU has taken an active approach to help its member states prevent election-related violence and democratic decline. The AU employs 'preventive diplomacy' as a crucial strategy to prevent conflicts from intensifying during sensitive periods, particularly during elections (Mogotsi, 2021). Preventive diplomacy includes the use of mediators, engaging in dialogue with political stakeholders, and creating methods to guarantee the peaceful resolution of conflicts related to election results. Preventive diplomacy has been essential in ensuring peace and stability in countries prone to post-election violence. Preventive diplomacy calmed tensions after the announcement of results in the 2023 Nigerian elections, thereby reducing the risk of violent protests. The AU's Election Observation Mission (AUEOM) and the strategic placement of diplomats facilitated communication between rival political groups.

In Lesotho (2022), Zambia (2021), and Gambia (2021), preventive diplomacy measures were also used to resolve political conflicts following the elections. In Zambia, the AU assisted by facilitating communication between opposing political parties through its diplomatic missions, thereby ensuring a peaceful transfer of power following the disputed elections. In addition, this significant action led to the AU withdrawing its acknowledgment of Yahya Jammeh as the president of The Gambia on January 19, 2017, due to his refusal to step down for

Adama Barrow, who won the presidential election in December 2016 (AU Communiqué, 2017).

In biannual special sessions, the AU commission chair provides a report on major policy suggestions, emerging trends, and significant results for continental election performance. The AU's Peace and Security Council discusses policies and ways to enhance democratic governance through peaceful and fair elections during the sessions. In light of the increasing indifference among the voters on the continent, the council equally assesses how socio-economic linkages affect democratic elections. In the past decade of democratic recession, the AU has increased its investments in election observation, electoral aid, and preventive diplomacy by providing technical and operational capacity building to the AU election management organizations. Article 18 of Chapter Seven of the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance states that:

“State parties may request the African Union Commission, through the Democracy and Electoral Assistance Unit and the Fund, to provide advisory services or assistance for strengthening and developing their electoral institutions and processes. The Commission may also send special advisory missions to assist a state party in strengthening its electoral institutions and processes” (African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance, 2007: 8).

The AU has constantly focused on building long-term capacity to ensure peace and security and consolidate democracy in Africa by providing national, regional, and continental electoral assistance. The Association of African Electoral Authorities, in collaboration with the AU, has channeled their focus on strengthening the election management system through cross-national peer learning and knowledge transfer. The AU has used its convening authority to arrange yearly peer-learning forums in order to address common electoral difficulties that Africa's electoral bodies encounter in administering peaceful and international-standard elections.

9. Conclusion

The global recession of democracy has resulted in a regress of democracy and freedom. There is no definitive explanation for what constitutes and causes a democratic recession in Africa. Diamond (2020) observed that most of the democratic failure or regression in the continent stems from the unrestrained desire for power among elected political leaders, who unconstitutionally remove restrictions on their power and

undemocratically extend and entrench it. With the rise of unlawful government changes in Africa, efforts to prevent democratic recessions on the continent have become increasingly visible in the past decade. The African Union (AU) recognizes that implementing norms in member states can be challenging due to various factors, such as the strong emphasis on state sovereignty and numerous obstacles. Despite the AU's role as a continental bulwark for democratic governance, peace, and stability, temporary peace during elections has the potential to undermine democratic progress. Consequently, contested elections, public revolts, and constitutional government transitions have resurfaced. Norm localization and the intergovernmental institutional nature of the AU have slowed down the development of democracy, with elections being a crucial pillar. Therefore, the AU must address charter flaws that allow member states to subvert democracy subtly. The rise in African constitutional coups and popular uprisings explains these discrepancies. Furthermore, it is crucial for African leaders and intellectuals to scrutinize and assess the mechanisms in order to enhance the effectiveness of the African Union, as well as to assess its successes and shortcomings. Finally, Africans must own the democratic process, and their leaders must recommit to democracy and decent democratic government to achieve a rebirth.

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