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BETWEEN IDEALISM AND REALISM: U.S. DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN AFRICA

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Abstract: This article analyzes the contradictions in U.S. policy on promoting democracy in Africa. Through a comparative study of the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations, it shows that support for democracy is largely shaped by geostrategic, security, and economic imperatives. Despite rhetoric focused on good governance and democratic values, Washington continues to cooperate with certain allied authoritarian regimes. The study thus highlights the persistent tensions between normative idealism and strategic realism in U.S. policy toward Africa.

Keywords: Africa, geostrategic interests, idealism, promotion of democracy, realism, U.S. foreign policy.

Résumé : Cet article analyse les contradictions de la politique américaine de promotion de la démocratie en Afrique. À travers une étude comparée des administrations Clinton, Bush et Obama, il montre que le soutien américain à la démocratie demeure largement conditionné par des impératifs géostratégiques, sécuritaires et économiques. Malgré un discours centré sur la bonne gouvernance et les valeurs démocratiques, Washington continue de coopérer avec certains régimes autoritaires alliés. L'étude met ainsi en évidence les tensions persistantes entre idéalisme normatif et réalisme stratégique dans la politique africaine des États-Unis.

Mots-clés : Afrique, politique étrangère américaine, promotion de la démocratie, Intérêts géostratégiques ; idéalisme et réalisme.

INTRODUCTION

U.S. foreign policy is frequently interpreted through the prism of major international crises or the priorities of successive presidential administrations. Yet, as the only power capable of sustaining a global diplomatic, military, and economic presence, the United States continues to shape international political dynamics across multiple regions. Understanding the evolution of U.S. foreign policy therefore requires moving beyond its traditional areas of focus to examine regions where American influence is exercised through less visible but strategically significant forms of engagement. Africa offers a revealing case through which to analyze the objectives, instruments, and contradictions of contemporary U.S. diplomacy. Since the end of the Cold

War, democracy promotion has become one of the defining features of U.S. foreign policy. This shift reflected a transformation of American grand strategy, in which the expansion of liberal democratic governance was presented as both a moral objective and a means of consolidating a U.S.-led international order (Mead, 2002). Under the Clinton administration, this vision was formalized through the doctrine of “democratic enlargement,” which replaced the Cold War strategy of containment with the goal of expanding the community of democratic states (Lake, 1993; The White House, 1994). Although subsequent administrations adopted different rhetorical and policy approaches, democracy promotion remained a recurring component of U.S. engagement with Africa, accompanied by initiatives emphasizing good governance, the rule of law, electoral processes, and the protection of human rights.

However, the implementation of these principles has unfolded within a competitive geopolitical environment. The growing economic and political influence of China, the renewed strategic presence of Russia, and the persistence of transnational security threats have reinforced Africa’s strategic importance in U.S. foreign policy. In this context, the promotion of democracy has intersected with security, economic, and diplomatic objectives, raising questions about the consistency of Washington’s normative commitments. This tension constitutes the central problem addressed in this article: to what extent U.S. democracy promotion in Africa reflects a genuine commitment to democratic governance, and to what extent it functions as an instrument for advancing geostrategic interests?

Through a comparative analysis of the Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama administrations, this study examines the ideological foundations of U.S. democratic discourse while assessing the ways in which democratic principles have been selectively applied in bilateral relations with African states. As Carothers (2012) observes, the Obama administration sought to reconcile democratic ideals with the pragmatic constraints of contemporary international politics, highlighting the enduring tension between normative aspirations and strategic imperatives.

The analysis is situated at the intersection of realist, liberal, and postcolonial approaches to international relations. Liberal theories interpret democracy promotion as a normative objective capable of fostering peace and international stability, whereas realist perspectives emphasize the primacy of strategic, economic, and security interests in shaping foreign policy choices. Postcolonial scholarship further highlights the unequal power relations embedded in external governance agendas and questions the universal applicability of liberal democratic models to diverse political contexts. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive analytical framework for examining the motivations and limitations of U.S. democracy promotion in Africa.

This article argues that U.S. democracy promotion has been characterized less by a coherent strategy of democratic consolidation than by a pragmatic and selective approach shaped primarily by geopolitical considerations. Existing scholarship has shown that democracy assistance and development aid have often been conditioned by strategic calculations rather than applied consistently across African states (Brown, 2005). Building on this literature, the study combines the analysis of official speeches, policy documents, and selected case studies to explore the relationship between democratic rhetoric and strategic practice in U.S.-Africa relations since the early 1990s. The article proceeds in three sections. The first examines the ideological foundations of U.S. democracy promotion following the end of the Cold War. The second analyzes the selective implementation of democratic principles through the lens of strategic partnerships and policy inconsistencies. The final section assesses the structural limitations and political ambiguities associated with promoting the liberal democratic model in contemporary African contexts.

I) Ideological Foundations of U.S. Democracy Promotion

Democracy promotion occupies a central place in the intellectual tradition underpinning U.S. foreign policy. Far from constituting a recent policy innovation, it derives from the doctrine of American exceptionalism, according to which the United States possesses a unique historical mission to advance political liberty and democratic governance beyond its borders. This belief has long served as a source of legitimacy for American international engagement and interventionism, framing foreign policy not merely as the pursuit of national interests but also as the fulfillment of a moral responsibility (Bunduku, 1999; Oueslati, 2014). The origins of this worldview predate American independence. They can be traced to the political culture of the seventeenth-century Puritan colonies, where religious beliefs and political identity became closely intertwined. John Winthrop's famous vision of the future colony as a "city upon a hill" symbolized the conviction that the emerging American community was destined to serve as a moral and political example for the rest of the world. This religious imagery subsequently evolved into a secular political doctrine that continued to shape American perceptions of its international role.

Following independence, this exceptionalist narrative was reinforced by the Founding Fathers, who portrayed the principles of the American Revolution as possessing universal relevance. In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson (1784/1978) argued that the ideals of liberty and equality represented principles with significance extending beyond the United States, thereby contributing to the emergence of a universalist conception of American democracy

(Jefferson, 1784/1978; Merrill, 1978). Although Jefferson's writings reflected the contradictions of his own era, they nevertheless became an important intellectual reference for later justifications of U.S. foreign policy. Consequently, American democracy came to be understood not simply as a domestic political system but as a universal model whose spread was viewed as both legitimate and desirable. This universalist conception rests on the assumption that representative government, individual liberty, the rule of law, and the protection of human rights constitute values applicable across political and cultural contexts. Democracy promotion therefore acquired an ideological function by presenting U.S. foreign policy as advancing universal principles rather than merely defending national interests.

Several scholars have emphasized the historical continuity of this ideological tradition. Larson (1965) argues that Puritan ethics profoundly influenced American political identity by linking national purpose to moral responsibility and by framing international action in ethical terms. Similarly, Weigel (1989) contends that the United States has consistently perceived itself as a nation defined not only by material power but also by a moral vocation rooted in the natural equality and dignity of individuals. Together, these interpretations suggest that democratic idealism constitutes a durable element of American strategic culture rather than a temporary foreign policy doctrine. The end of the Cold War reinforced the political relevance of these ideas. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, democracy promotion became a central organizing principle of U.S. grand strategy. Rather than merely containing ideological rivals, successive administrations presented the expansion of democratic governance as a means of consolidating a stable international order compatible with American leadership. This strategic reorientation was explicitly articulated by Anthony Lake (1993), who argued that the United States should replace the doctrine of containment with one of "democratic enlargement," thereby making the spread of democracy an essential objective of post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy.

Within this framework, Africa assumed growing strategic importance. Successive U.S. administrations incorporated democracy, good governance, and respect for human rights into their diplomatic engagement with African states, presenting these objectives as essential conditions for political stability and economic development. However, the normative discourse surrounding democracy promotion cannot be understood independently of geopolitical considerations. As U.S. strategic priorities evolved, democratic principles coexisted with concerns related to regional security, counterterrorism, economic interests, and competition with rival powers. The ideological foundations of U.S. democracy promotion therefore reveal an enduring tension between normative aspirations and strategic calculations. While democratic universalism provides the primary moral justification for American engagement abroad, its

implementation has been shaped by geopolitical priorities. Democracy promotion should be understood not solely as the expression of liberal ideals but also as an instrument through which the United States seeks to maintain its international influence and advance its foreign policy objectives.

II. The American Double Standard: Between Democratic Conditionality and Strategic Interests

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has linked its relations with African states to political conditions emphasizing democratization, good governance, economic liberalization, and respect for human rights. This approach reflected the transformation of international aid practices in the post-Cold War era, in which political reform became an important criterion for external assistance. Democracy promotion was therefore presented not only as a normative objective but also as a mechanism intended to encourage political stability and economic development (Brown, 2005; Huber, 2005). However, the application of these principles revealed significant inconsistencies, as U.S. policy often adapted democratic expectations according to the strategic importance of individual African states. The Clinton administration provides an early illustration of this tension between democratic discourse and geopolitical pragmatism. Although Washington promoted multiparty elections, institutional reforms, and market-oriented economic policies throughout Africa, its engagement remained selective. The administration's approach was shaped by the belief that democratic transitions could contribute to political stability while simultaneously expanding U.S. influence in the post-Cold War order (Clinton, 1996; Bunduku, 1999). Yet, in practice, strategic interests limited Washington's willingness to confront authoritarian partners. Angola represents a particularly revealing case. Despite extensive criticism of President José Eduardo dos Santos's regime regarding political restrictions and democratic deficiencies, the United States maintained important diplomatic and economic relations with Luanda. Angola's position as a major oil producer and the presence of American energy interests contributed to a cautious U.S. approach toward governance issues. A similar pattern could be observed in Gabon under Omar Bongo, where strategic considerations related to energy resources and regional influence moderated American criticism of authoritarian practices. These cases demonstrate that democratic conditionality was often subordinated to calculations involving economic access and geopolitical stability (Cohen, 2020; Goldsmith, 2001).

Conversely, regimes considered less strategically significant were more likely to face diplomatic pressure or economic sanctions when accused of violating democratic principles.

This unequal application of democratic standards reveals a structural contradiction within U.S. foreign policy: democracy was promoted as a universal principle, yet its application depended heavily on the strategic value of individual partners. As several scholars have argued, external democracy assistance in Africa has often reflected a donor-driven approach in which political reforms were encouraged selectively rather than applied consistently (Ake, 1996; Diamond & Plattner, 2010). The African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), adopted in 2000, illustrates this complex relationship between economic engagement and political conditionality. The initiative sought to strengthen trade relations between the United States and African economies by providing preferential access to the American market. However, eligibility was formally linked to criteria including market reforms, governance standards, and respect for political rights. While AGOA represented an important instrument of economic cooperation, its implementation demonstrated the limits of conditionality, as several beneficiary states continued to experience democratic deficiencies while remaining important partners for Washington (Brown, 2005).

Under George W. Bush, the relationship between democracy promotion and security priorities became even more pronounced. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, transformed U.S. foreign policy by placing counterterrorism and international security at the center of strategic thinking. In his address to Congress following the attacks, Bush emphasized the connection between political instability and global security threats, while his 2002 State of the Union Address presented the expansion of freedom and democracy as essential elements of American foreign policy (Bush, 2001, 2002). In this context, democracy promotion became associated with the prevention of terrorism and the stabilization of fragile states. This security-oriented approach was reflected in the creation of the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC) in 2004. The MCC introduced a model of foreign assistance based on measurable indicators related to governance, economic freedom, and institutional performance. Officially, the initiative sought to reward countries demonstrating commitment to democratic governance and effective institutions (Brown, 2019). However, critics noted that the strategic environment continued to influence the selection and treatment of partner states, limiting the extent to which political criteria were applied.

The Bush administration's policy illustrates the transformation of democracy promotion from a primarily ideological project into a security instrument. Democratization was framed as a means of addressing the conditions believed to facilitate extremism and state failure. This logic justified deeper U.S. engagement in strategic regions such as the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. Nevertheless, cooperation with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments remained

common when they provided security assistance (Peleg, 2009). The cases of Zimbabwe, Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti highlight this selective approach. Washington strongly criticized Robert Mugabe's government in Zimbabwe, particularly after disputed elections and increasing restrictions on political opposition, leading to targeted sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Yet, at the same time, the United States maintained close relations with Kenya and Uganda, despite persistent concerns regarding electoral manipulation, restrictions on civil liberties, and democratic backsliding. These states occupied central positions within U.S. regional security strategies due to their geographic importance and their cooperation in counterterrorism operations in East Africa (Cohen, 2020).

Djibouti provides another example of the tension between democratic principles and strategic imperatives. Despite criticism of President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh's government concerning political freedoms and human rights, Djibouti became a key American security partner due to its strategic location and the presence of U.S. military facilities. The importance of Djibouti for counterterrorism operations and regional surveillance significantly influenced Washington's willingness to prioritize stability over democratic pressure. The Obama administration inherited these contradictions while attempting to redefine democracy promotion through a more institutional and multilateral approach. In his 2009 speech before the Ghanaian Parliament, Obama famously argued that Africa did not need "strongmen" but rather "strong institutions," emphasizing the importance of accountable governance and effective political institutions (Obama, 2009). This discourse represented a shift away from the emphasis on individual leaders toward a focus on institutional capacity and civil society.

Programs such as the Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) reflected this new orientation by promoting leadership development, civic engagement, and entrepreneurship among African youth. However, beyond its developmental objectives, YALI also served a diplomatic purpose by strengthening American influence among emerging African elites in a context marked by Chinese economic expansion on the continent (Carothers, 2012).

Despite this rhetorical adjustment, the fundamental contradiction remained unresolved. The Obama administration continued to support democratic institutions, electoral assistance programs, and civil society organizations while maintaining security partnerships with governments whose democratic records remained contested. This contradiction was particularly visible in the Sahel, where the rise of jihadist movements encouraged Washington to prioritize security cooperation and regional stability over strict democratic conditionality. Furthermore, Western democracy assistance programs occasionally generated criticism among African political actors who perceived them as forms of external interference or as extensions of

unequal power relations inherited from colonial structures. Postcolonial perspectives emphasize that democracy promotion can reproduce asymmetrical relationships when external actors attempt to define political legitimacy according to their own institutional models (Ashcroft, 2002; Spivak, 2008). From Clinton to Obama, U.S. democracy promotion in Africa therefore reveals a persistent tension between normative commitments and strategic calculations. While democratic governance remained central to American diplomatic rhetoric, its practical implementation was shaped by security concerns, economic interests, and geopolitical competition. Rather than representing a coherent project of democratic transformation, U.S. policy appears to have functioned as a selective strategy in which democratic principles were promoted most strongly when they aligned with American interests.

II) Limits of Applying the Liberal Democratic Model to Africa

The promotion of liberal democracy in Africa has often been based on the assumption that political institutions can be transferred across different historical and social contexts. However, the continent's democratic trajectories reveal significant variations shaped by colonial legacies, state formation processes, socioeconomic structures, and local configurations of power. Africa should not be understood as a homogeneous political space but as a collection of diverse experiences in which democratic practices have been negotiated, adapted, and sometimes contested. Consequently, democratic consolidation cannot be reduced to the organization of multiparty elections; it also depends on the existence of effective institutions, the protection of political freedoms, accountable governance, and socioeconomic conditions that allow citizens to meaningfully participate in political life (Ake, 1996; Cheeseman, 2015). The democratization wave of the 1990s occurred within an international context marked by the global expansion of liberal economic and political norms. In many African states, political reforms were closely associated with economic restructuring programs promoted by international financial institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Structural adjustment policies, privatization programs, trade liberalization, and reductions in state intervention were presented as necessary conditions for economic recovery and institutional modernization. Under the Clinton administration, democracy promotion was integrated into this vision of market-oriented reform, where political liberalization and economic openness were viewed as mutually reinforcing processes (Bunduku, 1999; Dembele, 2024).

However, the results of this approach were contested. While economic liberalization contributed in some cases to macroeconomic stabilization and greater integration into global markets, it also generated significant social costs, including rising inequality, weakening of

public services, and increased vulnerability among disadvantaged populations. These consequences affected the legitimacy of reforms promoted by Western actors and contributed to perceptions that democracy promotion was inseparable from externally imposed economic models (Brown, 2005). The association between political reform and neoliberal restructuring therefore created tensions between the formal expansion of democratic institutions and the lived socioeconomic realities of many African citizens. Beyond economic considerations, the limitations of the liberal democratic model also relate to questions of institutional adaptation. Several African scholars have argued that democratic development cannot be separated from historical experiences, cultural practices, and indigenous forms of political organization. Ake (1996) emphasizes that democracy in Africa cannot simply be measured according to institutional arrangements borrowed from Western systems; rather, it must be examined through the relationship between political participation, social legitimacy, and the capacity of states to respond to citizens' needs. Similarly, studies of African democratization highlight that political institutions function depending on local power structures, social networks, and historical trajectories (Diamond & Plattner, 2010; Mustapha & Whitfield, 2009).

From this perspective, the external promotion of liberal democratic institutions is often perceived as a continuation of unequal power relations between Western states and African societies. Postcolonial approaches argue that democracy promotion may reproduce forms of political hierarchy when external actors present their own institutional models as universal standards of political development (Ashcroft, 2002; Spivak, 2008). This criticism does not necessarily reject democratic principles themselves but questions the assumption that a single institutional model can provide a universal pathway toward political legitimacy. The difficulties of institutional transplantation are also visible in the relationship between multiparty competition and social fragmentation. In several African states, the introduction of competitive elections has not always resulted in the development of programmatic political competition based on ideological differences. Instead, electoral mobilization has been influenced by ethnic, regional, or patronage networks. While these dynamics are not unique to Africa, they have sometimes intensified existing social divisions and complicated processes of national integration (Cheeseman, 2015). Electoral governance constitutes one of the most significant challenges to democratic consolidation. In a number of African countries, elections have been characterized by allegations of manipulation, restrictions on opposition movements, limitations on media freedom, and constitutional reforms designed to extend presidential mandates. The longevity of leaders such as Paul Biya in Cameroon, Denis Sassou Nguesso in the Republic of Congo, Teodoro Obiang Nguema in Equatorial Guinea, and Yoweri Museveni in Uganda

illustrates the persistence of hybrid political systems combining formal democratic institutions with authoritarian practices.

These institutional weaknesses have produced cycles of political crisis, particularly when electoral outcomes are contested. Disputed elections can generate mass protests, repression by security forces, and sometimes violent confrontation between competing political groups. The 2010–2011 post-electoral crisis in Côte d'Ivoire represents a significant example of how unresolved institutional conflicts can escalate into political instability (Gutiérrez & Caffarel Serra, 2014). Such cases demonstrate that elections alone are insufficient indicators of democratic consolidation when institutional trust and political legitimacy remain fragile. These challenges also reveal the limitations of external democracy promotion strategies. Although international assistance programs have contributed to strengthening electoral institutions, civil society organizations, and governance mechanisms, their effectiveness remains constrained when domestic political structures do not support genuine accountability. Democracy cannot be consolidated solely through institutional engineering from outside; it depends on internal political dynamics, social acceptance, and the capacity of national actors to adapt democratic principles to their own historical realities. Therefore, the difficulties encountered in applying the liberal democratic model in Africa should not be interpreted as a rejection of democracy itself. Rather, they highlight the importance of recognizing that democratization is a historically situated process shaped by domestic conditions and international power relations. The experience of African states demonstrates that democratic consolidation requires more than the adoption of formal institutions: it requires legitimate political systems capable of responding to social demands, reflecting local realities, and reducing the structural inequalities that often undermine democratic development.

Conclusion

The analysis of U.S. democracy promotion in Africa reveals a persistent contradiction between the universalist discourse of liberal values and the strategic calculations that shape their implementation. Although the administrations of Clinton, Bush, and Obama presented democracy, human rights, and good governance as central objectives of U.S. engagement, their policies demonstrate that these principles were often applied selectively according to security, economic, and geopolitical priorities. This selectivity has limited the transformative capacity of democracy promotion and reinforced perceptions that democratic conditionality serves instruments of influence. The continued cooperation between Washington and strategically

important authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes reveals the gap between normative commitments and foreign policy practices. At the same time, the challenges facing democratization in Africa cannot be explained solely by external inconsistencies. They also reflect the complexity of domestic political trajectories, historical legacies, institutional weaknesses, and the difficulty of applying a universal liberal model across diverse social contexts. Democratic consolidation therefore depends not only on external support but also on locally rooted political processes capable of generating legitimacy and accountability. Finally, the emergence of alternative partners such as China, Turkey, and the Gulf states is reshaping Africa's international environment and reducing the monopoly of Western normative influence. U.S. democracy promotion appears less as a linear project of democratic diffusion than as a contested field where ideals, interests, and competing visions of political development intersect. The future of democratic governance in Africa will depend on the interaction between domestic transformations and the evolving global balance of power.

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