

How Ethnic and Sectarian Politics Undermine Democracy in Africa

An essential idea of democracy—the ideal Nelson Mandela was willing to die for—is that all votes are equal. It doesn't matter that some people have more money than others, or more education, or that they have lived in a place longer than some others. It doesn't matter whether they are of European, African, or Asian descent. It doesn't even matter who has studied up more on the issues! When the votes are counted up, everyone's choice has equal weight.

Vocabulary



- disenfranchise
- sectarian
- condominium
- reconciliation
- genocide
- subjugate
- muster out
- demobilize
- amnesty



Young men play soccer under their capital's skyline in Gaborone, Botswana, one of the most stable and democratic countries in Africa.

Photo by Andy Nelson / © 2003 The Christian Science Monitor

An essential idea of democracy is that all votes are equal—no matter that some people have more money and education than others or that they come from a minority group.

That's the way it's supposed to be. But some cultures put great stress on differences—among ethnic, tribal, and other identities. In those places, it's harder to treat everyone equally. It may be hard in such places even to see everyone as fully human. During the genocide in Rwanda, for instance, which you will read about later in this lesson, Hutu militias urged ordinary people to kill the minority Tutsi people by referring to them as “cockroaches.” But the two groups are actually closely related. They'd intermarried for centuries. Their conflict is an example of ethnic politics.

This kind of ethnic politics has worked against democracy in Africa. For decades, South Africa's elaborate schemes of racial classification **disenfranchised** most of its people—*deprived them of their vote*. It also made the whole country an outcast in the family of nations.

As you have read, Africa is a land of immense diversity. Africans speak many languages, practice many religions, and live many different lifestyles. Often these differences result in sectarian strife. **Sectarian** describes anything *relating to religious or other strongly held beliefs*. As you read in Lesson 2, when the Muslim warrior Amr ibn al As conquered Egypt in AD 639, the Muslims laid down new rules for the vanquished: convert to Islam, pay a special religious tax, or face the Muslims on the battlefield. This was a case of sectarian politics, where different religious and cultural viewpoints went head to head.

You've also read that many African countries were artificial constructs. Their borders were often drawn not to outline natural homelands but to reflect colonial logic. This has only exacerbated Africa's ethnic and sectarian differences and therefore has made it harder to build national unity.

How Sectarian Dictators Make It Difficult to Hold Free Elections

The German writer Max Weber introduced a concept known in English as “the state monopoly on violence.” It has many different aspects, including the idea that private citizens don't have their own armies or personal militias. Those who control the US armed forces, for instance, do so as duly elected or appointed public officials. This is part of the rule of law. All service members swear an oath to protect the US Constitution—not to any one personal leader.

But in this lesson, you will read about many political leaders—and military men who took over political leadership by force—who did have their own armies. They used force or the threat of force against:

- Political opponents during election campaigns (as in Brazzaville in 1997)
- Elected leaders (as in Sierra Leone in 1997)
- Their fellow citizens (as in Sudan, Liberia, Rwanda, and other places).

Democracy requires more than just free elections. Even so, you can't have it without them. A country's ability to hold free elections is an index of its health as a democracy. Dictators, or strongmen as they are sometimes called, leading their own personal armies, are a threat to free elections, democracy, and public order.



Zulu women participate in a mass-action rally, marching through Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1992.

Photo by Robert Harbison / © 1992 The Christian Science Monitor

How Sectarian Politics Hinders Justice and Equal Treatment Under the Law

Do people trust the police in their community? Do they trust the courts to treat people fairly? Those two questions are additional important tests of a democracy's health. "Yes" answers to both are a good sign. Good policing and fair administration of justice support the quality of life in a community, at a basic level.

But when sectarian politics intrudes on the life of a country, it often strikes at justice and law. On 21 March 1960, in the South African township of Sharpeville, white police opened fire on an unarmed crowd of black protesters after some of the demonstrators began throwing stones. Protestors then began to flee, but police continued to shoot. They killed 69 and wounded more than 180. This "Sharpeville Massacre" galvanized black South Africa.

The crowd had gathered to protest the hated *pass laws*. The pass law system had been in place for a century and a half. But it had recently been tightened under what *Time* magazine called "the Boer [Afrikaner] regime of stubborn, stiff-necked Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd."

Here's how *Time* explained the 1960s pass system—and its larger effects on South African justice: "If an African travels from the countryside to the city, or just across the street for cigarettes, South Africa's ubiquitous, hard-fisted police check his pass. If he stands outside his front door without his pass, the police will not let him walk five feet to get it. He is hauled off to jail, without notice to his employer or family, and fined or imprisoned. Murders go unsolved while the courts are jammed with pass offenders."