# Neo-Consensual Democracy: A Critical Analysis of its Theory and Practice

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### Abstract

*Neo-consensual democracy is a political theory that stands in place of consensual democracy suggested by Kwasi Wiredu to replace majoritarian democracy. This theory seeks to balance in a complex contemporary African society the competing interests of different groups through a process of consensus-building. African societies with multi-ethnic groups practised consensual democracy in the pre-colonial era, which was replaced with Majoritarian democracy by the colonialists. Since the adoption of majoritarian democracy, Africa has faced different political issues ranging from political instability to ethnic and tribal clashes. These two major challenges are the result of the majority-minority dichotomy and the individualistic tendency created by majoritarian democracy. These challenges created division and poverty among Africans. Critics, however, argued that consensual democracy, as practiced in pre-colonial Africa, cannot fit contemporary Africa due to its complex nature. The majority of Africans no longer live in their villages as they used to in pre-colonial settings; rather, more people now live in urban cities. The ideas of lineage heads, village councils, and village heads are no longer obtainable in most contemporary societies. This paper provides the theory and practice of neo-consensual democracy, which is a modification of consensual democracy. This paper also examines its strengths, weaknesses, and applicability to contemporary political contexts. However, this idea is prone to further development in terms of practical applications.*

**Keywords: Neo-Consensus, Democracy, Consensus, Colonisation, Africa, Post-Colonial Governance**

## Introduction

As part of his decolonisation project, having considered the challenges Africa is faced with as a result of its adoption of the majoritarian democracy, the Ghanaian-born philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, proposed a return to consensual democracy. In his paper titled "Democracy and Consensus in Africa: A Plea for Non-party Polity", he advocated that consensual democracy was what was in practice in pre-colonial Africa. According to him, consensual democracy should replace majoritarian democracy. He reminded Africans of how consensual democracy was practised with how it was practised in traditional Ashanti society. He highlighted that the lineage head of every lineage in the village stood as the representative of his lineage at the village council, coordinated by the village head to deliberate on issues until a consensus was reached (Wiredu, 1995). Wiredu argues that with consensual democracy in pre-colonial Ashanti society, there was no minority-majority division among different families or ethnic groups. Secondly, the poverty level was low compared to what is obtainable in contemporary African societies. This was said to be a result of the communal life of pre-colonial Africans.

Wiredu's proposal to return to consensual democracy received a lot of backlash from scholars such as Emmanuel Eze, Fayemi Ademola K., and Victor Olaonipekun, among others. According to these scholars, Wiredu's suggestion was a good idea, but it falls short of the understanding that Africa in recent times is not the same as Africa in the pre-colonial era. The continent

has become more populated, urbanised and more complex. On this note, the consensual democracy suggested by Wiredu as a replacement for majoritarian democracy cannot work in contemporary African society due to its complexity, civilisation, and modernisation.

The American-born African Philosopher, Barry Hallen, had an opinion different from that of Fayemi, Eze, and Olaonipekun. Hallen published a paper titled "Reconsidering Consensual Democracy" in support of Wiredu's proposal on a return to consensual democracy with modification, According to Hallen, if modified, the consensual democracy suggested by Wiredu can be used in contemporary African societies, and it will help to address the political issues the continent is faced with, however, Hallen did not put forward any proposal as to how the modification can be done. To fill the vacuum left unfilled by Hallen, and most especially Wiredu, this paper attempts to spell out the modalities of practising Neo-consensual democracy suggested in my earlier work titled "Kwasi Wiredu's Alternative to Majoritarian Democracy in Contemporary Africa", published in 2024 to make the consensual democracy work for Africa in a way that suits the Africanness of the people. Neo-consensual democracy is a new form of consensual democracy that addresses issues that were the concerns of critics and fills the vacuum left unfilled by consensual democracy.

As a political theory, neo-consensual democracy will hopefully gain increasing attention and support from scholars of political philosophy as a means of promoting democratic governance in societies with social, economic, and political divisions. The new theory, just like its original form, emphasises the importance of consensus-building as a means of balancing the competing interests of different groups by allowing them to be part of decision-making at all levels, and it seeks to promote the participation of all citizens in the political process. However, not with the lineage head as the representative of his lineage and village head as the coordinator of the lineage heads, but in a modernised form that suits the settings of contemporary African societies.

This paper provides an exposition of the theory and practice of neo-consensual democracy, examining its strengths and weaknesses, and assessing its applicability to contemporary political contexts. Nevertheless, we need to have a glimpse of what majoritarian democracy has done to Africa before the search for an alternative became a necessity.

**An Overview of Majoritarian Democracy in Africa**

Africa is among the continents rated as a third-world continent and a continent in the global south alongside other continents like Asia (excluding Japan, Israel, and South Korea), Latin America, the Caribbean, and Oceania (excluding New Zealand and Australia) (UNCTAD, 2023). The continent as a whole has faced several challenges in the past few decades, ranging from ethnic war, religious war, poverty, and political instability to economic instability. Some of these challenges were not in existence in pre-colonial Africa. On this note, scholars of African descent begin to find out what could be responsible for the challenges. The challenges were traced to the adoption of majoritarian democracy by most African societies, which was handed over to them by colonisation. Majoritarian democracy as a form of democracy promotes individualism, whereas Africans are communal by nature. Communal because they were known to live and do things together as a large family. The adoption of the majoritarian system of democracy creates a division between groups that are supposed to live together peacefully, which degenerates into what is tagged as the minority and majority dichotomy. Africa, being a multi-ethnic society, is now faced with the challenge of one ethnic group dominating another due to its population and political influence. The majority dominates political decisions and offices, while the minorities are marginalised. Any effort to give the minority a say in decision-making and political offices will amount to what can be called the dictatorship of the minority. It is believed that the minority, as the name indicates, should not have more say than the majority, who is very large in number.

Aside from these major challenges, majoritarian democracy has brought upon Africa, that particular type of democracy is not suitable for underdeveloped or developing continents such as Africa. The system involves the use of a large amount of money and a

high level of knowledge of how the system should be practiced for its success. These two are missing in Africa, the continent is poor, and most time it depends on developed countries for financial aid; some of them borrow from developed countries to finance their country's annual budget. Similarly, the level of illiteracy, which can be seen in Africa,is high. This was explicated by Jakkie Cilliers when he argued that Majoritarian democracy in Africa was built on a weak foundation, which is poverty, lack of political education for the citizenry and the leaders, ethnic diversity, etc. All of these are why majoritarian democracy is not a system for Africa, and why Africa is regressing rather than progressing. (Jakkie, 2016). Jakkie testifies that democracy has been unable to deliver its development potential in Africa for three reasons, which are;

- Lack of capacity by the government
- Questionable electoral process and quality, and
- The existence of neopatrimonialism, otherwise called godfatherism, ridiculed electoral processes in Africa (Jakkie, 2016).

According to Jakkie, if majoritarian democracy continues in Africa till 2070, Africa would have regressed more; and, as a result, what will be left will be something else that is yet unknown. Using Nigeria as an example of majoritarian democracy in Africa. There are many obvious reasons to agree with Jakkie that majoritarian democracy is not a form of democracy for Africa, which is still developing. The last general election conducted by the Nigerian Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) gulped a huge amount of money worth three hundred and five billion Naira (N305 billion). This is minus their annual budget of forty billion Naira (N40 billion) (Premium Times, 2022). This money can be used for developmental projects that will benefit citizens and improve their welfare. Also, the literacy rate of the Nigerian population as of 2021 is 77.62% (Globaldata, 2022), and despite having over 50% educated people, the political education in Nigeria is nothing to write home about. The political space is mostly dominated by the mediocre because educated individuals are busy looking for means to survive.

**Consensual Democracy**

The need to replace majoritarian democracy prompted Ghanaian-born philosopher Kwasi Wiredu to propose a return to the consensual democracy practiced in the pre-colonial African Era. Wiredu argues that consensual democracy, if put into practice, will address some of the major challenges facing Africa as a continent. One of these challenges is poverty, and the second is the individualistic tendency, which amounts to a majority-minority dichotomy and, above all,a self-serving representation by the elected representatives. (Wiredu, 1995). According to Wiredu, the type of consensus he advocates does not focus on agreement concerning matters of truth and morality; rather, it is primarily concerned with practical decision-making. Consequently, reasonable individuals can reach a consensus on actions to be taken through compromise, even if they do not share agreement on issues of truth or morality (Wiredu, 2021). The communal nature of Africa is why poverty was at its minimum in precolonial Africa. Africans join hands to cultivate land and plant crops rather than hire labour, they share food among themselves irrespective of class or status, and help one another in terms of other needs. They have a way of assisting each other to finance big projects, different from getting loans with high interest,which is a Western-oriented system (Moemeka, 1998).

The consensual democracy, Wiredu espoused was based on a family setting as used by the Ashantis, where Wiredu himself came from. The entire family lives in the same compound. A compound of this understanding may comprise three to ten or more houses or buildings, with the eldest male member of the family as the family lineage or clan head. However, in rare cases, the lineage head may be female. The heads of each family within a particular community (village) meet at a designated place,most times under a big tree at the village square, to discuss issues affecting them among themselves until a consensus is reached (Wiredu, 1995). The consensual democracy, Wiredu highlighted, presents the people with a substantive form of representation rather than the formal and self-serving representation that the majoritarian democracy presents to Africa.

African and non-African scholars commended Wiredu for his great proposal. Lius Villoro (2020) said the system suggested by Wiredu is similar to

the indigenous American system of democracy. He provided an example of the Tojolabal community in Mexico as a place where people gather to deliberate on issues, as described by Carlos Lenkersdorf. Victor Olaonipekun is another African philosopher who commends the proposed consensual Democracy in his work titled *Democracy and Consensus in Traditional Africa: A Critique of Kwasi Wiredu* published in 2020. Critics of the idea based their major criticism on the complex nature of contemporary African societies. The continent has a larger population and more civilisation, and it is now modern compared to the pre-colonial era. The majority of the people who live in their family compound in their different villages and towns have now migrated to the cities with a different setting that is not family compound oriented. Hence, consensual democracy cannot be applied in this new setting of urban cities (Fayemi, 2010; Eze, 1997).

The American-born philosopher, Barry Hallen, differs in his contribution to the debate on the adoption of consensual democracy. Rather than joining the critics of the proposed consensual democracy by Wiredu, Hallen believes that it is the best system for Africa, and he calls for a reconsideration of the system as an alternative to majoritarian democracy. He said in his paper titled "Reconsidering the Case for Consensual Governance in Africa" that if modified, consensual democracy should work better for African societies (Hallen, 2019). Aside from Hallen, who called for a reconsideration of the case for consensual democracy, Chimphambano (2024), in his reaction to Matolino's work *Consensus as democracy in Africa* published in 2018 argues that there is need for a new approach that will incorporate elements of both consensual and majoritarian democracy to ensure effective governance and representation in contemporary Africa. Thaddeus Metz, in his article on consensualism, drawing on a credible communal ethic, defends consensualism from major objections that have recently been made and remain as yet unanswered (Metz, 2025). It is on this note that this paper intends to expose the modified consensual democracy as Neo-consensual Democracy (Obi, 2024). The advantages and disadvantages of the proposed idea of democracy in African societies are discussed in the next section.

## Neo-consensual Democracy

Neo-consensual democracy is a blend of two words, 'neo' and 'consensus', meaning 'new' and 'collective agreement'. It is a new form of democracy that emerged as a result of the modification of consensual democracy to suit contemporary African societies. The neo-consensual democracy, if adopted in contemporary Africa, will help to eradicate the minority-majority dichotomy issue created by majoritarian democracy, reduce the cost of election and governance, which will translate to better lives and living in Africa (Obi, 2024).

As its fundamental philosophical structure, neo-consensual democracy jettisoned the lineage or clan head for landlord/landlady structure as the basis for its representative parameter. This idea was adopted for the neo-consensual model because it is a system that evolved naturally from people living together in urban cities in some parts of African societies, such as Nigeria. In Nigeria, there is an association between the residents of a particular area headed by the chairman under the Street Association, Community Development Association, and Community Development Council. These associations have administrative bodies and take up developmental projects to develop their communities without government intervention.

The main argument here is that there is a way people in contemporary Africa organise themselves, which is important to advocate for their collective rights. Families in contemporary Africa live in compounds (mostly plots of land owned by them, private investors, or the government) on streets, avenues, or closes. It should be noted, here, that most family in contemporary Africa is a nuclear form of family. The father is the head of his family and the one who represents his family whenever there is a need for that. Away from the family, all streets, avenues, and closes have Landlords/Residents Associations with almost every head of a family or compound playing active roles in decision-making processes. Therefore, it implies that the modern arrangement of people in African neighbourhoods testified to the fact that consensual democracy can work if modified and will remain a viable alternative to majoritarian democracy in contemporary African societies.

The family is the smallest unit in the street association political setting, and each family is duly represented by the head of the family. At a larger level, after the street association, there is a Community Development Association CDA, the CDA is the association of different street associations. There is the Community Development Council (CDC) after the CDA, which is a combination of two, three, or more CDAs. In essence, the CDC is larger than the CDA, and the Local Council Development Area (LCDA) still exists after CDC. In Lagos, for example, there are four thousand, three hundred and twenty-five (4, 325) CDAs, fifty-seven (57) CDCs, and that translates to the fifty-seven (57) Local Council Development Areas (LCDAs), Ogun state has fifty-seven (57) Local Council Development Areas (LCDAs), and Osun State has sixty-nine (69) LCDAs. In most cases, there are at least five CDCs comprising one LCDA. In the CDA structure, the house on the street is second to the basic unit, family, after which we have the street association, then the CDA, then the CDC, the LCDA, and finally the state before the regional or federal government. Apart from Nigeria, where the idea of CDA is practised, Gakhal (2021) confirms that such practice is operational in South Africa and Egypt.

At each level or stage, consensus must be reached on any issue at hand, and the opinion of everybody must count. This structure is similar to the traditional lineage structure, but it is restructured according to what is obtainable in contemporary Africa. Community Development Associations are non-profit and voluntary organisations structured towards achieving community goals, which will aid the development of their immediate community. The structure of CDAs may vary depending on their state or country. For instance, in Egypt, according to Law on Non-Governmental Organisations, Article 1, CDAs are officially recognised public service providers and, according to the NGO law of 2002, "comprise natural or judicial persons or both of them with a total of at least ten persons in all cases, and oriented to a purpose other than material profit."

Neo-consensual democracy is a relatively new system of governance. Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart argued that consensual democracy is more effective than majoritarian democracy in promoting stability and democratic governance in societies divided along social, economic, and political lines (Lijphart, 1999). This is another reason that substantiates the assurance that neo-consensual democracy will succeed in contemporary Africa. In support of neo-consensual democracy, for instance, at the national level, Lijphart said that if an ethnic group comprises thirty per cent of the total population, then such an ethnic group will occupy thirty per cent of the positions in all government agencies. For instance, if the population of a particular ethnic is thirty per cent of the country's total population, this ethnic group takes thirty per cent of the positions in the police force, thirty per cent in the Army, Immigration, Customs, civil service, and other national and civic segments of society; based on this, there will be nocry that they have been marginalised (Lijphart, 1977).

It is essential to highlight in this paper that consociational democracy, as articulated by Dutch political scientist Arend Lijphart in his book *Democracy in Plural Societies (1977)*, differs from consensual democracy, despite some similarities. Consociational democracy prioritises individuality and permits various culturally based community laws, while consensual democracy is centred on broader consensus. Similarities between these two forms of democracy are primarily found in the methods used to select representatives. In consensual democracy, a lineage head, who is expected to be morally upright and competent, represents their clan. In contrast, consociational democracy brings together elites from each ethnic group or tribe to make decisions that cater to the interests of the entire society (Lijphart, 1977).

Neo-consensual democracy blends elements from both consensual and consociational democracy. This model necessitates a landlord or landlady role, independent of societal status, while at higher levels of governance, preference may be given to members of the elite. Most importantly, agreements within this framework are reached through consensus among the groups before any opinion or issue is finalised. Neo-consensual democracy makes as its core value the importance of consensus-building a means of promoting stability and democratic governance in societies that are divided along social, economic, and

political lines. This approach has been successful in several countries, including the Netherlands, Switzerland, Lebanon and Belgium (Lijphart, 1977; Berends, 2020).

On the other hand, emphasis on consensus building can also lead to a lack of accountability and transparency in decision-making. It can limit marginalised groups' participation in the political process. This is why people representing their people must be ready to question any form of non-accountability and transparency to make leaders accountable at all times. Robert A. Dahl has a different opinion on the use of consensus as a tool to mediate between the majority and the minority. According to him, consensus will be 'too simplistic and inaccurate' (Dahl 1970:15). Instead of consensus, counter power by a marginalised party or group would be the best option. Lord Acton shared a similar view that it is only with power that power can be put in check (Darlberg-Acton 1988: 521). However, if the argument of the two scholars is critically analysed, one will realise that such an approach will lead to anarchy, and the society will be unable to achieve its developmental goals. On another note, Dahl and Darlberg-Action fail to acknowledge that the minority lacks the adequate power required to fight the majority in possession of state power. The implementation of majoritarian democracy in Africa poses significant challenges in effectively checking power with power, as the majority that wields state authority often seeks to maintain a monopoly over it.

Before colonisation, Africans governed themselves through a system that, despite its flaws, was arguably more appropriate for their contexts. Therefore, considering a return to such governance structures, with little adjustment to suit contemporary societies, could prove advantageous. Neo-consensual democracy is proposed as a replacement for majoritarian democracy, integrating elements of both traditional consensual democracy and majoritarian democracy. Below are its key components:

- **Communal participation**: This will allow for adequate representation of every family through their family heads. In a situation where there is more than one family on a plot, families channel their opinions through who they have selected as their representatives.

- **Substantive representation**: This has to do with everybody being duly represented in decision-making. The opinions and actions of the representatives reflect the wishes, needs, and interests of the people they represent.

- **Respect for the rule of law**: everyone, irrespective of their status or office, should follow the laws and regulations that govern society.

- **Respect for human rights**: the rights of every member of society should be duly respected without any form of favouritism or nepotism.

- **Empathy**: This lies in the ability of the representatives to understand and share the feelings of those they represent. This will help to build strong relationships among members of society and, in turn, translate to societal growth and development.

- **Election**: the selection by vote of a person or persons from among candidates for a position. It must be noted that the election here will be a non-party election, as it is in a majoritarian democracy.

All of these are considered with the idea of substantive representation, inclusive representation, and moral uprightness, devoid of any form of self-service representation, which are major elements of consensual democracy used to form neo-consensual democracy.

**Reasons Neo-Consensual Democracy Should Be Chosen Over Majoritarian Democracy**

Neo-consensual democracy and majoritarian democracy are two different approaches to democratic governance, each with its strengths and weaknesses. Here are some reasons why you might choose neo-consensual democracy over majoritarian democracy:

1. **Promoting stability and social cohesion**: Neo-consensual democracy emphasises the importance of consensus-building as a means of promoting stability and social cohesion in societies that are marked by social, economic, and political divisions. By seeking to balance the competing interests of different groups, a neo-consensual democracy can help reduce social conflict and promote a sense of shared ownership in the political process.

2. **Ensuring representation of majority-minority groups**: Majoritarian democracy can sometimes lead to the marginalisation of minority groups, as decisions are made based on the preferences of the majority. By contrast, neo-consensual democracy seeks to ensure the representation of cuts across all groups in the political process by giving them a voice in decision-making and promoting the participation of all citizens.

3. **Encouraging compromise and cooperation**: Majoritarian democracy can sometimes lead to a winner-takes-all mentality, in which the majority imposes its will on the minority. Neo-consensual democracy, on the other hand, encourages compromise and cooperation, as decisions are made through a process of consensus-building. This can result in more sustainable and inclusive policies that are supported by a broader range of stakeholders.

4. **Providing a check against authoritarianism**: In majoritarian democracies, the majority can sometimes use its power to undermine democratic institutions and processes, leading to authoritarianism. Neo-consensual democracy provides a check against this by promoting a culture of compromise and cooperation that can help to safeguard democratic institutions and processes against authoritarianism.

5. **Eradicate Poverty**: A return to neo-consensual democracy will unite people as it used to be in the pre-colonial era, and such communal relationships will help to reduce poverty to the barest minimum. Food and other items would be shared among the people, and it would be difficult to know who does not have among the people.

## Conclusion

Neo-consensual democracy is proposed as a replacement for majoritarian democracy, integrating elements of both traditional consensual democracy and majoritarian democracy. It is important to note that both neo-consensual democracy and majoritarian democracy have strengths and weaknesses, and the choice between the two depends on the specific context and needs of a given society. Ultimately, the success of a democratic system depends on a range of factors, including the quality of institutions, the level of citizen participation, and the degree of political culture in a given society. So, we can say that for Africa, which is more communal than individualistic, and which has a very high level of poverty rate and uneducated people, and minimum financial capacity in terms of election and governance funding, neo-consensual democracy will be the best form of governance. This model of democracy, when adopted, would take care of some of the shortcomings of both majoritarian and consensual democracy. The reason is that it will be cost-effective, i.e it will require less funding compared to majoritarian democracy, it will allow for effective participation by all members of the society, and it gives room for adequate consultation before decisions are made. Rather than keeping up with a form of democracy that is causing more harm than good, a form of democracy that does not align with the Africaness of the African societies, a model that evolves from Africa should be adopted to address African political issues. However, this is not to say that neo-consensual democracy does not have its own shortcomings, but any identified shortcomings can be addressed by future research.

## Suggestions and Recommendations

It will be a good thing for this paper to suggest to the people and government of African countries, and perhaps, the government of other Global South countries, to have a rethink about the system of governance adopted. The paper will suggest and recommend that these countries should jettison the majoritarian model of democracy due to its need for a high level of literacy, which is not obtainable for now, the high cost of conducting periodic elections, lack of adequate understanding of the pros and cons of the model, among other things.

As argued in this paper, it is recommended that African societies should return to their system of governance that best suits their nature, which is inclusive and less expensive. This should be done in a modernised form that will go with what is obtainable in contemporary (urbanised and civilised) African societies. The proposed Neo- Neo-Neo-Consensual Democracy as suggested, should be given a trial and let's see how well it can work. However, the African Union (AU) can set up a committee of political

scientists and philosophers to critically analyse and restructure, if the need be, the Neo-consensual democracy before its implementation.

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