

A Critical Conversation with Bernard Matolino on his **Consensus as Democracy in Africa**

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**Abstract**

Matolino's book critically analyses consensual democracy, a political system often hailed as a natural fit for African societies. Through this, Matolino questions the viability of consensus amidst modernity and examines its potential shortfalls. By comparing consensus to majoritarian democracy, Matolino highlights the challenges associated with each of the aforementioned systems. The book also explores the historical roots of consensus in African societies and its compatibility—or lack thereof—with contemporary majoritarian democratic principles as advocated in the West. Ultimately, Matolino suggests that while consensus may have certain merits, it is not a panacea for Africa's current political problems. I highlight the main arguments in the book and show that it calls for a more nuanced approach that will incorporate elements of both consensual and majoritarian democracy to ensure effective governance and representation in contemporary Africa.

**Keywords:** African politics, Consensus Democracy, Political theory, Majoritarian Democracy, Democratic Representation

**Introduction**

The introduction of the book provides a synopsis of how consensus is taken as a mode of democracy that was natural among many African societies. Consensus accentuates the aptitude of Africans to put aside their differences in favour of a common goal (MATOLINO 2018). So, Matolino presents a reflection of his dissatisfaction with consensual democracy. He does this by making a critique of prominent figures in consensus. In the book, Matolino views democracy as a modern political project in Africa. By implication, the book is relevant in African political theory as it discusses an Africa that is transitioning from its traditional ethos into the modern world. Matolino investigates two key things in the book. The first order activity is to define democracy itself, which has been reduced to representation. The second one is to ascertain the viability of consensus as a superior mode of democracy, as claimed by those who argue for it. Therefore, the book is essentially both an inquiry into the conceptual meaning and coherence of the claims made for a consensual democracy and a reflection of how pre-colonial Africa informs her contemporary political choices.

In this short conversation, building on Matolino's analysis, I raise additional criticisms of his approach and argue for a reimagined model that integrates elements of both consensual and majoritarian democracy to conceptualize a hybrid approach that synthesizes the two modes of democracy. Through this, I also propose a framework to balance the strengths of consensus with the imperatives of individual rights' contexts, which will be more or less looked after by certain elements of the majoritarian democracy.

### **Analysis of Matolino's main Arguments**

In chapter one of the book, Matolino primarily explores the assumptions made in favour of consensual democracy. He starts by lamenting that majoritarian democracies have at least four main problems that genuinely undermine their operationalization. The first problem is that majoritarian democracies fail to capture the "maximal interpretation of democracy" (MATOLINO 2018); second, majoritarian democracies offer a blank check to the winners who are now free to do as they please because they have "won an election" (MATOLINO 2018, 10); third, majoritarian democracies are "alien in Africa"; and fourth, majoritarian democracies are destructive because they promote "division" (MATOLINO 2018). The general assumption made by those who argue for consensus is that consensus is a natural and homegrown political system (MATOLINO 2018). This is because, to them, the naturalness of consensus as a political system emanates from the self-evident nature of consensus in all adult relations (MATOLINO 2018). As such, Kwasi Wiredu (1995) and others recommend that consensus should be the new order of running things on the continent. What follows is an exposition of the claims that some scholars have put forward to express their support for consensus and their resentment towards majoritarian democracies on the African Continent.

The first one is George Carew (2004), who argues for transformative politics by claiming that imposed economic policies and principles have perpetually undermined the vibrancy and survival of African states (MATOLINO 2018). By this, Carew blames the capitalist Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) for the stagnancy of African countries (MATOLINO 2018). To Carew, African states ought to adopt a deliberative democracy because it involves a dialogue (Matolino 2018). Carew gives three main reasons why he thinks dialogue is key in a deliberative democracy. The first reason is that a "deliberative democracy promotes a common understanding and a shared sense of purpose". This ensures that issues are clarified, social knowledge is expanded, and there is some guardianship of the values of freedom and equality that guarantee social equity in the political system. The second reason is that no voice is silenced in a deliberative democracy because all concerned parties will have a say. The last reason is that dialogue promotes civic governance rooted in the principles of equality and freedom. Pursuing this further, Carew argues that global capitalism is failing to bring about democracy. Thus, he suggests that it has to be evaded and replaced with civil society because it has the right equipment to challenge global capitalism by changing institutions of global capitalism to democratic ones.

The second proponent of consensus Matolino presents in this chapter is Edward Wamala (2004). Wamala is an avid supporter of consensus such that he believes that we can still talk of democracy in African traditional societies although they were clearly monarchical (MATOLINO 2018). Wamala highlights three factors he claims were key for consensual democracy to flourish in such societies. The first factor he identifies is demography. Traditional African societies were relatively small, which meant they could easily be governed. Wamala uses the Ganda society as a case in point to support this claim, arguing that the Ganda society was made up of independent patrilineal clans who often came together to discuss issues (MATOLINO 2018). The second factor is that interpersonal relations are a social capital that naturally extends to political practice (MATOLINO 2018). Lastly, Wamala argues that people in the Ganda society, especially the *Okukiika*, used to pay homage to the chief's court to probe recent developments in their communities (MATOLINO 2018). Needless to say, this fostered active participation and loyalty, both of which we have witnessed in modern-day democracies.

Another scholar presented by Matolino in the book is Kwasi Wiredu (1995). Wiredu argues that consensus was the order of the day in African decision-making processes (MATOLINO 2018). Wiredu adds that consensus seeks to take everyone's views into account, but it is not always the case that there is a total agreement. Wiredu further traces the foundation of consensus to the Ashantis who elected the head of their lineage to be a member of the council although there was no formal voting. Instead, Wiredu argues that the head was chosen in order of seniority but it has to be noted that consensus was first felt at the election of the head of a lineage. He adds that even the position of the chief was hereditary and his word was but a consensus of the council. The chief could not impose some things because he could not risk being deposed (MATOLINO 2018). Wiredu also argues that consensus was based on the assumption that all members of society ultimately have the same interests, but they differ in their perception of those interests. Thus, Wiredu articulated that consensus entails two concepts of representation namely; formal representation and substantive representation (MATOLINO 2018). The former represents a given constituency and the latter represents the will of the represented. However, Wiredu admits that consensus does not eliminate internal or external conflicts, which is seen in traditional Africa. So, conflicts on the continent today also exist but as a result of certain minority groups who cause strife because they were kicked out of power (MATOLINO 2018). Wiredu also thinks voting is a rare necessity in consensus, such that it is only required to break an unusual impasse (MATOLINO 2018).

Matolino further explores the context of democratic challenges, arguing that there is a tension between democracy and capitalism. This is because the collective demands of democracy clash with the key capitalist ideas such as marginal productivity and the operation of free market forces (MATOLINO 2018). Matolino uses the United States of America as an example where he argues that it has not been able to successfully merge democracy and capitalism, and this is problematic. This makes Matolino question how simple it could be to implement

both capitalism and democracy in Africa as there is no balance between them. Thus, Matolino believes capitalism lacks legitimacy, and that democracy has been imposed on Africans (MATOLINO 2018). Matolino also argues that there are two ways of understanding the cause of Africa's democratic and economic failure. The first one is the externalist perspective and the other one is the internalist perspective. Externalists are of the view that imposed external factors have underdeveloped Africa. On the other hand, Internalists suggest that Africa's social, political and economic structures are responsible for its own problems (MATOLINO 2018). While this is so, Matolino argues that we first have to deal with internal factors before blaming external factors and we ought to create proactive and vibrant institutions that will not just behave as they please (MATOLINO 2018).

In chapter two of the book, Matolino seeks to offer a conceptual analysis of consensus and investigates if consensus can be rationally defended (MATOLINO 2018). In the same manner, Matolino explains what he thinks makes consensus very attractive over a majoritarian democracy. He also outlines the critiques presented by those who deny the viability of consensus. To Matolino, consensus sees majoritarian democracy as inadequate and unsuitable for African states due to the inherent dynamics that characterise these states (MATOLINO 2018). Matolino presents three issues he believes make consensus very attractive and plausible. First, by definition, consensus is superior to majoritarianism; second, the methods and procedures of consensus achieve more than those of majoritarianism; and third, consensus avoids party politics. Matolino also identifies three problems he finds with majoritarian representation. First, working out representation is tricky; second, the expected loyalty of representatives; and third, the interpretation of representation (MATOLINO 2018).

Consensus, then, is superior because it offers a fertile ground through which to talk differences instead of just putting everything to a vote. This is because voting does not offer any possibility that there are richer ways of solving conflicts and elections are a poor and impoverished way of finding representation (MATOLINO 2018). Consensus is also superior because of its element of accountability. By this, consensus offers reasons for particular choices, while in a majoritarian democracy, it is just a yes or no instantiated on the ballot through votes (MATOLINO 2018). The last claimed form of the superiority of consensus is that consensus abjures party politics since it seeks not to be involved in the evils that come with political parties. Matolino also uses insights from Wiredu, who laments the existence of political parties and identifies four of their problems. First, political parties will stop at nothing to accumulate power. Second, party loyalty is very challenging. Third, political party organisations rest on ethnicity. Lastly, there is some exclusion of those who did not vote for a particular party from development projects (MATOLINO 2018).

However, there are some notable critics presented by Matolino, such as Emmanuel Eze (1997) and Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ani (2013), who are worth noting. In essence, Matolino critiques consensus by saying that its accountability is limited, such that it does not operate in a strict sense. He believes accountable leadership should be extended to

other factors like successful management of the fiscus, providing other forms of leadership, infrastructure development and protecting the people from external aggression (MATOLINO 2018). According to Matolino, Eze, on the other hand, argues that consensual democracy does not represent the essence of democracy but a moment of democracy because democracy primarily exists to manage differences among people (MATOLINO 2018). Eze also criticizes the viability of consensus by denying the immanence of consensus amongst Africans (MATOLINO 2018). Ani, on his part, argues that there is controversy around the workability of consensus because we have not identified traditional consensus as deliberative democracy (MATOLINO 2018). Ani's understanding is that instead of talking of consensus, we should talk of deliberative democracy because deliberative decisions have what he considers a superior epistemic value (MATOLINO 2018).

In chapter three of the book, Matolino explores whether consensus satisfies the broad requirements of democracy. In doing so, this chapter juxtaposes democracy with consensus. By this, it outlines the strengths and weaknesses of both consensual and majoritarian democracy. In addition, Matolino has emphasized the idea of freedom all over the chapter as he thinks we need it because each individual has various interests that ought to be addressed. Matolino also notes that there are four basic principles that are the cornerstone of democracy. These are equality, inclusion, expressive freedom and transparency (MATOLINO 2018).

The chapter also explains what democracy is not, and this is achieved by denying the common assumption that democracy is voting. This is because voting can be engineered into a charade as people may vote freely in an election that may, in the end, have manipulated results (MATOLINO 2018). Democracy is also not about the functionality of the arms of government because these arms have inherent weaknesses, such as representation being reduced to the functions of institutions, being elitist in nature and succumbing to party loyalty as a result of appointments (MATOLINO 2018). In terms of what democracy is, Matolino argues that it is about the direct involvement of the people or their being meaningfully and sufficiently represented. Matolino agrees with the suggestions of Claude Ake, who exposes what he considers the three basic expectations of democracy, such as participation, consent of the governed and accountability by those in power (MATOLINO 2018). While consensual democracy and majoritarian democracy share certain elements, it is important to also note that they are seemingly dissimilar. This is because there is prioritisation and legitimation of oppositional politics in a majoritarian democracy, and consensus does not exactly fit that category (MATOLINO 2018).

In addition, Matolino inquires if consensus is truly democratic as compared to majoritarianism. He argues that consensus meets the requirements of meaningful representation by achieving both formal and substantive representation (MATOLINO 2018). However, he notes that this is another point of departure that

exists between consensus and a majoritarian mode of democracy whereby the leaders in the legislative bodies of a majoritarian democracy often actively seek to abuse power to meet their interests. In such a setting, representation is reduced to a façade. Then, consensus has the upper hand because representatives are loyal to their constituencies due to the absence of political alignments or affiliations.

Matolino identifies some problems associated with consensus. The first problem has to do with how decisions are made in practice, which makes voting unnecessary. Formal voting only becomes necessary to break an impasse (MATOLINO 2018). The second one is that not all participants have an equal status in terms of contributions that determine the final decision. Third, individuals have personal values and seek to argue for decisions that will help them realise those values. In addition, Matolino argues that consensus is discriminatory in the sense that decision-making processes are dominated by those we think are naturally intellectually gifted or educated (MATOLINO 2018). Worse, consensual dispensation compromises freedom of association as one inevitably claims membership in already existing associations or lineages.

Matolino adds that consensus is counterproductive because it equally succumbs to the dictatorship of the community (MATOLINO 2018). Another big problem of consensus is that the selection of leaders is hereditary, and this narrows down the pool from which the leaders are drawn. These leaders are also selected on grounds of certain desired personal characteristics but not everyone participates in this and this makes it a secretive election which is not exactly a democratic element (MATOLINO 2018). Overall, Matolino raises two important issues that compromise the efficacy of consensus as a maximal interpretation of democracy (MATOLINO 2018). The first one is that the freedom of individuals is undermined when trying to address collective interests. The second one is that the intended aims of the political structure in consensus induce homogeneity and retain the same values at the expense of a different opinion. Eventually, Matolino closes up the chapter by arguing that collectivist democracies have had a bad reputation on the continent. So, unless it is proven that consensus is not one of them, it cannot be adopted (MATOLINO 2018).

In chapter four, Matolino explores the correlation between consensus and authoritarianism. He seeks to find out how enabling it is. By this, Matolino evaluates the claims made by Wiredu in his advocacy of a non-party polity. In this Chapter, Matolino argues that Wiredu's non-party polity is dangerously close to the repressive one-party systems that emerged on the continent immediately after independence from the West (MATOLINO 2018). So, the chapter focuses on the problems Wiredu identifies with a party-based system, consensus as a non-party polity, consensus as the same as one-party polity, and the problems associated with a one-party system. The chapter opens up by exposing the problems Wiredu finds with political parties. Wiredu argues that the winner-takes-all attitude after an election leaves no room for the loser's opinions to be heard, so much so that they just resolve to oppose for the sake of opposing (MATOLINO 2018). The second problem is that representatives are only loyal to the parties they belong to and not the people who put them in power. Third, there is a serious problem of ethnicity in political parties such that those in power often remember those who did not vote for them and seek to punish them (MATOLINO 2018). Similarly, certain appointments are done on the basis that the appointed are from the same ethnic group as the leaders of the ruling party.

Wiredu believes that governments by consent have high moral value but that does not necessarily imply that there has to be representation. However, Matolino finds this to be neglectful of the fact that in the modern-day representation is key and this implies that political parties are crucial (MATOLINO 2018). Still, Matolino thinks Wiredu makes a good point about the problems of representation, stating that there are three reasons why citizens may be left out (MATOLINO 2018). First, a representative may not be who people voted for; second, citizens often have no opportunity to convey their grievances; and third, citizens grievances may be ignored if their political party has lost.

Wiredu believes consensus as a non-party polity is a democracy regardless of his dismissal of voting and political parties (MATOLINO 2018, 137). The assumption is that democracy does not require elections or parties to flourish. Wiredu also has a party distinction where he considers party<sub>1</sub> as an individual with interests they want to pursue, party<sub>2</sub> as an adjective for a participant in a decision-making process and party<sub>3</sub> as a group of people seeking to win government power (MATOLINO 2018). However, he notes that Wiredu fails to clarify the variance between party<sub>1</sub> and party<sub>2</sub> (MATOLINO 2018). It is clear that Wiredu seeks to protect the integrity of party<sub>1</sub> and party<sub>2</sub> instead of party<sub>3</sub> as party<sub>3</sub> is a vehicle of difference.

Matolino questions if a non-party polity is the same as a one-party polity. He agrees with Carlos Jacques (2011) who argues that we need to take into account three considerations before juxtaposing a non-party polity with a one-party system (MATOLINO 2018). The first one is that Africans are communal and collectivist. The second one is that the collectivist understanding of life translates into a political outlook and the third one is that the communal understanding is treated with suspicion and actively handed out (MATOLINO 2018). As such, there are two similarities that are developed. First, both seek to develop a traditional system into a political system that retains the virtues of the old system (MATOLINO 2018). Second, both use the same resources of traditional Africa to fight modern Western political party democracies (MATOLINO 2018).

Chapter five focuses on examining the aspirations of Africans and their political systems by questioning whether the focus on local and seemingly 'natural' democratic versions adequately addresses their needs and interests (MATOLINO 2018). The chapter also assumes that humans fundamentally share common needs and that any political system that is put in place should be able to serve these needs for the dignified existence of the African peoples. Of importance is the key question it asks: what would enable consensus in today's Africa? (MATOLINO 2018). The chapter also acknowledges that Africa has evolved and is no longer as communalistic as it was a few decades ago.. Essentially, it suggests that Africa will not benefit from a foreign-imposed system of governance (Democracy), nor from a system that is largely traditionalistic and untested in a modern capitalist setting.

### **Some Objections to Matolino's Arguments**

While Matolino makes an interesting case by critiquing consensual democracy for undermining individual freedoms and fostering homogeneity, he fails to adequately acknowledge the strengths of consensus in managing ethnic diversity and fostering social cohesion, especially in societies where majoritarian systems have often led to conflict and marginalization of certain groups. Through this, Matolino risks presenting an incomplete evaluation of the viability of consensus.

Besides that, Matolino accuses consensus of being inherently rigid, especially regarding the hereditary selection of leaders and the dominance of intellectual elites. It is understandable that these are potential flaws. However, Consensus-based political systems are more dynamic than he insinuates. There are a few selected African societies that have demonstrated hybrid governance systems that merge traditional consensus with modern democracies. Countries adopting such approaches include Rwanda, South Africa and Botswana, among others.

Consensual democracy has also been generally conceived as being authoritarian-leaning. This argument risks privileging majoritarianism over consensus. Regardless of this, one could argue that majoritarian democracies are simply a tyranny of the majority against the minority. In fact, ethnic divisions and winner-takes-all politics are social problems that come with majoritarianism, but consensus has the potential to mitigate them. By this, it is plausible to suggest that consensus is simply a double-edged sword.

To address most of the issues raised, I propose a governance model for Africa that makes room for dynamic institutional flexibility. The understanding here is that such an approach will allow governments to shift between consensual and majoritarian mechanisms depending on the issue at hand. This should be seen as a custom approach to governance. For example, social and cultural policies could consider prioritizing community-driven thought systems and economic and security decisions may rely on existing majoritarian structures in society. Such an adaptive governance framework could be an antidote to most of the problems facing Africa and ensure both inclusivity and efficiency in African statecraft.

### **Conclusion**

The main aim of the book is to propose adequate representation of the people and legitimization of the government. The dissimilarity of consensus to the one-party system, as suggested by Matolino, seems negligible because the only difference between the two is the intention, but similarities emerge from the results of the intentions. The book makes it very clear that consensus is sufficiently worrying to put it into practice on the continent. This paper, however, proposes that we cannot and should not completely do away with consensus. The paper suggests that we ought to adopt a hybrid approach where the two systems (consensus and majoritarianism) should be in sync. Generally, such a discussion on consensus and majoritarian democracy is intellectually stimulating. It also offers an insight into African political reality for students and academics who wish to keep the conversation of African Social and Political thought going.



## **Declarations**

\*The author declares no conflict of interest or ethical issues for this work

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