
Original Research Article

Decolonising Liberal Democracy: Amílcar Cabral's Political Thought and the Reconstruction of Participatory Democracy in Africa

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Abstract: The persistence of democratic challenges in Africa has generated debates about whether liberal democracy, as inherited and practised across the continent, adequately responds to African political realities. While existing explanations often emphasise weak institutions, poor leadership, and electoral deficiencies, this article argues that the problem also concerns the limited understanding of democracy as primarily a system of representation and periodic elections. Using a philosophical reconstruction method and a critical interpretive approach, the article examines Amílcar Cabral's political thought as a resource for rethinking democratic theory in Africa. It argues that Cabral's participatory politics provides a framework for decolonising liberal democracy by reconceptualising citizens as active agents of political life, rather than occasional participants in electoral processes. The article develops three interconnected principles of Cabralian democratic reconstruction, namely: political agency, participatory institutions, and political consciousness. It does not reject liberal democratic commitments to constitutionalism, rights, and accountability. Rather, it argues that these principles require deeper participation to achieve meaningful legitimacy. By reconstructing the democratic implications of Cabral's philosophy of liberation, the article contributes to debates on decolonial political theory and the possibilities of participatory democracy in Africa.

Keywords: African Political Philosophy, Amílcar Cabral, Decolonial Democracy, Democratic Reconstruction, Liberal Democracy, Participatory Politics.

Introduction

The spread of liberal democracy across Africa after colonial rule was accompanied by great expectations. Many believed that elections, constitutions, political parties, and the rule of law would create accountable governments and strengthen citizen participation. In many countries, however, the existence of democratic institutions has not always produced meaningful democracy. Elections take place, but many citizens remain distant from political decision-making. Political parties compete for power, but ordinary people often have limited influence over public policies. Governments change through elections, yet the relationship between the state and the people frequently remains shaped by exclusion and inequality.

This situation has created an important debate within African political thought. Some scholars argue that Africa's democratic problems result from the failure of political leaders to properly implement liberal democracy. From this perspective, the solution is stronger institutions, better elections, and greater respect for constitutional principles. Democracy itself is not the problem. The problem is weak democratic practice (Diamond, 2019, pp. 35-49). Other scholars disagree. They argue that the problem is deeper than poor implementation. They maintain that many political institutions inherited after colonialism were created for administration and control, rather than popular participation. As a result, postcolonial states often adopted democratic structures without transforming the political assumptions behind those structures (Ake, 1996, pp. 129-137; Mamdani, 1996, pp. 17-35). In this view, democracy in Africa cannot simply mean copying existing Western models. It requires a critical examination of what democracy means and how political institutions should relate to citizens.

This article contributes to this debate through the political thought of Amílcar Cabral. Cabral is usually discussed as an anti-colonial revolutionary, a nationalist leader, and a theorist of culture. His role in the liberation struggle of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde has received significant scholarly attention (Chabal, 1983, pp. 12-30; Davidson, 1981, pp. 33-48). However, less attention has been given to the democratic implications of his political philosophy. This article argues that Cabral should also be understood as a democratic thinker whose conception of participatory politics provides resources for decolonising liberal democracy in Africa. Rather than presenting Cabral as a democratic theorist equivalent to modern democratic philosophers, this article reconstructs the democratic implications contained within his broader philosophy of liberation (Cabral, 1979; Tomas, 2021). The argument of this article is not that liberal democracy should be completely rejected. Liberal democracy has contributed important ideas such as constitutionalism, human rights, accountability, and limitations on political power. These principles remain valuable. The argument is that liberal democracy becomes insufficient when democracy is reduced mainly to elections and representation. A society may hold regular elections, while citizens remain politically powerless between election periods. A government may have a constitution, while ordinary people have little role in shaping decisions that affect their lives.

A reconstruction of democracy in Africa does not necessarily require abandoning liberal principles. Rather, it requires examining how liberal ideas can interact with African political experiences. Afisi (2023, pp. 1-12) argues that African democratic reconstruction requires attention to the relationship between liberal openness and communitarian concerns. His argument suggests that democratic reform in Africa should not be understood as a choice between liberal individualism and African communal values, but as an attempt to develop institutions capable of responding to both.

Cabral's political philosophy challenges this narrow understanding of democracy. For him, liberation was not simply the replacement of colonial rulers with African leaders. True liberation required the transformation of political consciousness and the active involvement of ordinary people in political life. The people were not instruments for achieving independence, they were the foundation of political authority itself (Cabral, 1979, pp. 53-72). This understanding suggests that democracy should be viewed as a continuous process of participation, rather than a political event that occurs only during elections. The central claim of this article is therefore that Cabral's participatory politics offers a framework for decolonising liberal democracy in Africa. By decolonising democracy, this article does not mean abandoning democratic values or returning to precolonial political arrangements. Rather, it means questioning the assumption that one institutional model represents the highest form of democracy for all societies. It means asking whether democratic institutions reflect the experiences, needs, and political aspirations of the people who live under them or not.

The method adopted in this article is philosophical reconstruction. This involves examining Cabral's political writings and reconstructing the democratic principles contained within them. Philosophical reconstruction allows political theory to recover normative insights from thinkers whose primary concerns were not limited to formal democratic institutions, but involved wider questions of freedom, authority, and human agency. Cabral did not write a systematic theory of democracy like many Western political philosophers. Nevertheless, his discussions of liberation, political education, participation, and popular organisation contain ideas that can contribute to democratic theory. The article also uses a critical interpretive approach by placing Cabral's ideas in conversation with liberal democratic theory and African political philosophy.

The article proceeds from the assumption that political ideas should not be judged only by the historical circumstances in which they were produced. Ideas developed during anti-colonial struggles can still offer important insights for contemporary political problems. For example, Cabral's emphasis on political consciousness emerged during a liberation movement. However, the problem he identified remains relevant in many African democracies today. Citizens often participate during elections, but have limited influence over political decisions afterward. A practical example can be seen in many African states where citizens vote regularly, but have little involvement in government planning, budgeting, or policy formation. In such situations, democracy exists institutionally, but remains weak socially. Cabral's approach raises the question of whether citizens should

participate only by choosing leaders or they should also participate in shaping the decisions made by those leaders.

The article therefore focuses on one question: Can Cabral's participatory political philosophy provide a basis for rethinking liberal democracy in Africa? It argues that it can. Cabral does not provide a complete institutional blueprint for contemporary democratic states. However, his emphasis on popular participation, political consciousness, and collective responsibility offers principles for reconstructing democracy beyond electoral competition. First, it reconstructs Cabral as a resource for democratic theory. Second, it develops a participatory account of democratic legitimacy. Third, it contributes to decolonial debates by showing how democratic principles can be adapted to different historical experiences. The importance of this argument lies in the fact that democratic debates in Africa often focus on improving existing institutions without questioning their deeper foundations. Electoral reforms, stronger courts, and better governance remain necessary. However, they may not be enough if democracy continues to treat citizens mainly as voters, rather than active participants in political life. Cabral's thought invites a broader understanding of democracy as a relationship between institutions and the people they are meant to serve.

The Objection: Cabral Was a Revolutionary, Not a Democrat

One of the strongest objections to using Amílcar Cabral as a resource for democratic theory is that he was primarily a revolutionary leader, rather than a democratic theorist. Cabral's political activity was shaped by the conditions of Portuguese colonial rule and the struggle for national liberation in Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde. His major concern was how an oppressed people could achieve independence, organise resistance, and transform colonial society. For this reason, some scholars may question whether ideas developed within an armed liberation movement can provide guidance for constitutional democracy in the twenty-first century or not (Chabal, 1983, pp. 12-30; Davidson, 1981, pp. 33-48).

This objection has some force. Cabral did not write a systematic theory of democracy comparable to thinkers such as John Rawls, Robert Dahl, or Joseph Schumpeter. His writings focused mainly on liberation, culture, political education, and revolutionary organisation. António Tomás (2021) argues that Cabral's intellectual contribution must be understood within the historical experience of anti-colonial nationalism, rather than separated from the political struggle that shaped his ideas. Cabral's political thought developed from the practical demands of liberation, not from the institutional questions that dominate contemporary democratic theory (Tomás, 2021, pp. 1-18).

Recent scholarship on Cabral continues to emphasise this revolutionary context. Studies of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC) liberation movement show that Cabral's leadership was closely connected to questions of military organisation, anti-colonial strategy, and the creation of a new political community after colonial rule (Barros & Almada, 2026, pp. 1-15; Southall, 2013; Chabal, 1983). This raises a serious philosophical question. Can a thinker whose political experience was shaped by revolutionary struggle contribute to democratic theory without simply

transferring revolutionary ideas into a different political environment? The concern becomes stronger when considering the historical experiences of several African liberation movements. Many movements that fought colonialism later became dominant political parties after independence. In some cases, they used their historical role in liberation to justify political control and limit opposition. Scholars of African politics have examined how liberation movements can transform from organisations of resistance into ruling institutions that struggle with accountability and democratic competition (Cheeseman, 2015, pp. 1-23; Southall, 2013, pp. 1-17).

The experience of Guinea-Bissau presents a particularly difficult case. Cabral's political vision emphasised popular participation, political education, and collective responsibility. However, after independence, Guinea-Bissau experienced political instability, military interventions, and struggles over political authority. These developments appear to create a tension between Cabral's democratic aspirations and the political realities that followed independence. Recent analyses of Guinea-Bissau's political history continue to highlight the country's long experience of instability after liberation, including repeated struggles between political institutions and military actors (Barros & Almada, 2026; Southall, 2013).

This criticism raises an important challenge. A political philosophy should not be judged only by its intentions. It should also be evaluated by its ability to explain and guide political practice. If a theory emphasises popular participation, but produces institutions that fail to protect participation, critics may argue that the theory itself requires serious reconsideration. However, this conclusion assumes that the failure of post-independence political systems can be directly attributed to Cabral's ideas. This assumption is difficult to defend. Political outcomes are shaped by many factors, including colonial institutional legacies, economic dependence, international pressures, leadership decisions, and social conflicts. Scholars of postcolonial Africa have repeatedly argued that the difficulties experienced by African states cannot be explained only by the ideas of individual leaders. They must also be understood through the historical structures inherited from colonial rule (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 17-35; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, pp. 77-94).

A similar point can be made by comparing Cabral with liberal democracy itself. The existence of democratic failure in a country with elections does not prove that democracy is philosophically defective. It shows that democratic institutions require social and political conditions that support accountability. In the same way, the political difficulties of Guinea-Bissau do not automatically prove that Cabral's participatory ideas lack democratic value. The appropriate approach, therefore, is not to treat Cabral's political practice as a complete democratic model. Instead, his ideas should be reconstructed philosophically. This method involves separating the principles within his thought from the specific historical conditions in which they emerged. Political philosophers frequently engage in this type of reconstruction. Rather than asking whether Cabral intended to formulate a democratic theory in the contemporary sense, philosophical reconstruction asks what normative principles can reasonably be derived from his political thought and how those principles illuminate present democratic challenges. This approach allows the analysis to remain

faithful to Cabral's historical context, while recognising the continuing philosophical significance of his ideas. They examine older ideas, identify their central arguments, and consider how those arguments can respond to contemporary problems.

A second criticism concerns the relationship between participation and individual rights. Liberal democratic thinkers argue that democracy must protect individuals against excessive collective pressure. John Stuart Mill, for example, warned that democratic majorities could threaten individual freedom if institutional protections were weak (Mill, 1861/2001, pp. 210-240). Contemporary liberal theorists continue to argue that democracy requires strong protection of individual rights, constitutional limits, and legal safeguards against majority domination (Dahl, 1989, pp. 85-100). From this perspective, Cabral's emphasis on collective responsibility may appear dangerous. A political system that places too much emphasis on community goals could ignore disagreement and suppress minority interests. African communitarian approaches have also faced similar criticism. Some scholars argue that appeals to community can sometimes create pressure for conformity, rather than genuine participation (Hallen, 2019, pp. 4-10).

However, this criticism assumes that participation and rights are necessarily opposed. Cabral's thought can be interpreted differently. His emphasis on collective involvement does not require the rejection of individual freedoms. Rather, it challenges the idea that individual rights alone are enough to create democratic citizens. A person may possess legal rights, but still lack meaningful influence over political decisions. This concern remains relevant in contemporary African democracies. Many citizens have constitutional rights and the ability to vote, yet they remain excluded from important political processes between elections. Recent discussions of democratic decline in Africa have highlighted that formal electoral institutions often coexist with weak accountability, limited citizen influence, and growing distrust in political systems (Cheeseman, 2020, pp. 1-15; Mbembe, 2001). Cabral's contribution is to show that democracy requires not only protection from state power, but also participation in exercising political power.

A further criticism is that participatory democracy may be unrealistic in large modern states. Robert Dahl argues that modern democracy requires representative institutions, because complex societies cannot depend entirely on direct participation by all citizens (Dahl, 1989, pp. 220-233). Joseph Schumpeter similarly argues that elections provide a practical method for organising democratic competition in large societies (Schumpeter, 1942, pp. 269-283). This objection is significant. A country with millions of citizens cannot organise every political decision through direct public meetings. Modern states require administration, expertise, and representative institutions. However, Cabral's argument does not require replacing representation completely. His contribution is the claim that representation without participation creates political distance between citizens and institutions.

Recent democratic theory has increasingly recognised that representative democracy can be strengthened through participatory and deliberative mechanisms. Fung (2015, pp. 513-522) argues that democratic legitimacy improves when citizens have opportunities to

participate beyond elections. Similarly, contemporary African political theorists have explored ways of combining democratic institutions with locally meaningful forms of participation and collective deliberation (Obi, 2024, pp. 77-88; Wiredu, 1995; Pateman, 1970; Fung, 2015). Therefore, the objection that Cabral was a revolutionary rather than a democrat should not be dismissed. It reveals genuine tensions between revolutionary politics and democratic governance. However, it does not eliminate the possibility of reading Cabral as a democratic thinker. The purpose is not to present Cabral as a complete alternative to all existing democratic theory. The purpose is to identify the democratic principles within his philosophy that can contribute to reconstructing democracy in Africa.

Cabral's relevance lies in his challenge to a narrow understanding of democracy. He forces democratic theory to ask whether democracy is simply a method of selecting leaders or it is a process through which people develop the capacity to govern themselves. His thought suggests that political freedom requires citizens who are not merely voters, but active participants in shaping their collective future. This raises a broader theoretical question: If Cabral's political thought contains democratic insights, what limitations within contemporary liberal democracy make those insights relevant to Africa today? The next section addresses this question by examining the relationship between liberal democratic institutions and the African democratic experience.

Liberal Democracy and the African Democratic Problem

Having established why Cabral can legitimately be reconstructed as a resource for democratic theory despite the objections, the discussion now turns to the democratic framework he seeks to illuminate. Liberal democracy has become the dominant political model in contemporary Africa. After independence, many African states inherited political institutions based on constitutional government, representative assemblies, and administrative structures introduced during colonial rule. Later, especially during the democratic transitions of the 1990s, many countries adopted multiparty elections and constitutional reforms. These changes were welcomed because they appeared to offer a path toward political accountability and stability (Bratton & van de Walle, 1997, pp. 12-31).

Supporters of liberal democracy argue that its basic principles are not limited to any particular culture or historical experience. They maintain that freedom, equality, political participation, and the protection of rights are universal values. From this perspective, African societies do not need a different form of democracy. They need stronger democratic institutions and leaders who respect democratic rules (Dahl, 1989, pp. 220-233; Diamond, 2019, pp. 35-49). This argument has some strength. Many democratic problems in Africa are connected to issues such as corruption, authoritarian leadership, weak judicial systems, and electoral manipulation. A country where elections are controlled by powerful individuals or where opposition groups cannot compete fairly cannot be considered genuinely democratic. Strengthening institutions is therefore an important part of improving democracy.

However, the institutional argument does not fully explain why similar democratic arrangements produce different results in different societies. Two countries may adopt

similar constitutions, conduct elections, and establish political parties, yet experience very different democratic outcomes. This suggests that democracy is not only about institutional design. It is also about the relationship between political institutions and the society in which they operate.

Claude Ake was one of the African scholars who challenged the assumption that Africa's democratic crisis was simply a problem of implementation. According to Ake, the problem was that democracy was often introduced as a formal arrangement, without creating real opportunities for popular participation. Citizens were given the right to vote, but they were often excluded from meaningful political decision-making (Ake, 1996, pp. 129-137). Democracy became focused on competition among elites, rather than the empowerment of ordinary people. This critique also aligns with participatory democratic theory. Carole Pateman (1970, pp. 22-44) argues that democracy becomes meaningful when citizens participate in decisions that affect their lives, rather than merely selecting representatives. Similarly, Fung (2015, pp. 513-522) maintains that democratic legitimacy is strengthened when citizens are given opportunities to participate continuously in governance beyond periodic elections. Together, these perspectives reinforce Ake's argument that democracy should be understood not simply as electoral competition, but as the sustained involvement of citizens in public decision-making.

This problem appears in political systems where elections become the main measure of democracy. Although elections allow citizens to select representatives, they do not automatically create continuous public involvement in decision-making. Democracy therefore requires more than electoral participation. It requires institutions that enable citizens to influence political processes beyond election periods.

The argument that African democracy suffers from institutional weakness also overlooks the colonial origins of many political structures. Mahmood Mamdani argues that colonial rule created a state system based on control and separation, rather than democratic participation. Colonial governments were designed to govern African populations, not to encourage their political agency (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 17-35). Even after independence, many African states continued to operate through institutions that concentrated power at the centre. Peter Ekeh makes a related argument by showing that colonialism produced a complicated relationship between the state and society in Africa. Colonial rule created a distinction between the official state and local communities, which influenced postcolonial political behaviour (Ekeh, 1975, pp. 91-103). The result was often a situation where citizens viewed the state as an external structure, rather than as an institution belonging to them.

Defenders of liberal democracy may respond that colonial history does not make liberal democratic institutions unsuitable for Africa. They may argue that all political systems develop historically and that African societies can adapt democratic institutions to their own circumstances. After all, democracy itself has changed throughout history. Ancient Greek democracy, modern liberal democracy, and contemporary participatory models are not identical. Therefore, Africa should not be treated as incapable of developing

its own version of liberal democracy. This objection is important because it prevents a simplistic rejection of liberal democracy. The problem is not that liberal democracy has no value. The principles of constitutionalism, human rights, and accountability remain important protections against political abuse. Any attempt to rethink democracy in Africa must preserve these achievements.

The deeper issue is that liberal democracy often gives priority to representation over participation. Citizens participate mainly by choosing leaders who then exercise political authority on their behalf. Joseph Schumpeter's influential understanding of democracy reflects this view. He defines democracy largely as a method through which citizens choose leaders through competitive elections (Schumpeter, 1942, pp. 269-283). In this model, ordinary citizens are important because they select political representatives, but they do not necessarily participate directly in political decision-making.

Cabral's political philosophy challenges this limited understanding of democratic participation. For him, political freedom requires more than choosing leaders. People must develop the capacity to understand political issues, organise collectively, and influence decisions affecting their communities. A population that votes, but lacks political consciousness remains vulnerable to manipulation by political elites (Cabral, 1974, pp. 38-45). The difference between these two approaches can be seen in the way they understand citizenship. Liberal democracy often presents citizenship primarily as a legal status. A citizen is someone who possesses rights and participates through established political procedures. Cabral's approach presents citizenship as an active practice. A citizen is someone who participates in shaping collective life. This difference has practical consequences. Consider a rural community where government officials arrive with a development project, but do not consult the people who will be affected. Under a narrow electoral understanding of democracy, the project may still be democratic if the government was elected. Under Cabral's participatory approach, democracy requires more. The community should have the opportunity to discuss, influence, and evaluate decisions that affect them.

The limitation of liberal democracy in Africa is, therefore, not the existence of elections themselves. It is the tendency to reduce democracy to electoral competition, rather than continuous citizen participation. Elections remain indispensable, because they provide peaceful mechanisms for choosing governments and ensuring political accountability. However, when democratic practice becomes confined largely to voting, citizens are transformed into periodic electors instead of active participants in public life. Democracy becomes strongest when electoral representation is complemented by sustained opportunities for citizens to deliberate, influence public policy, and hold institutions accountable between elections (Schumpeter, 1942, pp. 269-283; Ake, 1996, pp. 129-137). This does not mean that direct participation can replace all forms of representation. Modern states are too large and complex for every citizen to participate directly in every decision. Representation remains necessary. The argument is that representation should be complemented by stronger forms of participation that allow citizens to remain active beyond elections.

It is within this context that Cabral becomes important. His political philosophy offers a way to rethink democracy without abandoning its valuable principles. By placing political participation at the centre of democratic life, Cabral provides a framework for questioning the limits of inherited liberal institutions, while preserving the goals of freedom, accountability, and collective self-government. The challenge, therefore, is not simply whether liberal democracy should be accepted or rejected. The more important question is how democratic principles can be reconstructed within African social and political contexts. Afisi (2023, pp. 5-10) argues that liberal openness can engage with communitarian concerns in ways that support democratic reconstruction. This perspective strengthens the argument that African democracy requires adaptation, rather than mere institutional imitation.

Cabral's Participatory Politics as a Democratic Alternative

The importance of Amílcar Cabral's political thought lies in his understanding that liberation is incomplete without the active involvement of the people. For Cabral, political independence was not the final goal of the anti-colonial struggle. It was only the beginning of a deeper process of social and political transformation. A society could remove colonial rulers and still reproduce forms of domination if ordinary people remained excluded from political life (Cabral, 1979, pp. 53-72).

This understanding provides the foundation for reading Cabral as a democratic thinker. Although he did not write a systematic theory of democracy, his ideas contain important reflections on political authority, citizenship, participation, and institutional legitimacy. His central concern was a simple, but important question. Who should be the true agent of political transformation? Cabral's answer was clear. The people themselves must be the creators of their political future. This position differs from the traditional liberal view where democracy is mainly organised around elections and representation. Cabral does not deny the importance of leadership or political organisation. However, he rejects the idea that political power should become the exclusive possession of a small group of leaders. For him, liberation movements and postcolonial governments fail when they replace colonial domination with new forms of elite domination.

Cabral's concern about elite domination remains relevant in contemporary African politics. In many countries, political participation becomes concentrated around elections. Citizens are mobilised during campaign periods, but become distant from government decisions afterward. Political parties often depend on citizens for votes, but provide few opportunities for ordinary members to influence policy. Cabral's political philosophy challenges this pattern, because it views participation as a continuous responsibility rather than an occasional activity.

A central idea in Cabral's thought is political consciousness. He believed that successful liberation required more than removing colonial authorities. People also needed to understand their social conditions and develop the ability to participate in shaping society. Political education was, therefore, not simply a tool for gaining support during the liberation struggle. It was a way of creating citizens capable of exercising political

responsibility (Cabral, 1974, pp. 38-45). Cabral's concept of political consciousness should not be understood simply as ideological agreement with a liberation movement or political programme. Rather, it refers to the development of the intellectual and practical capacity to analyse social conditions, recognise structures of domination, and participate actively in collective political action. Political consciousness, therefore, transforms individuals from passive subjects of political authority into active agents capable of contributing to democratic life (Cabral, 1974, pp. 38-45).

This idea challenges a common assumption in liberal democracy that political participation mainly requires legal rights. Having the right to vote is important, but Cabral argues that citizens also require knowledge, awareness, and organisational capacity. A person who has the right to vote, but lacks information about political choices may possess formal political freedom without experiencing meaningful political power. For example, a community may have the legal right to elect local representatives. However, if citizens do not understand government budgets, public policies, or their rights as members of the community, their participation remains limited. They may choose leaders, but have little ability to hold them accountable. Cabral's emphasis on political consciousness suggests that democracy requires educating citizens to become active participants, rather than passive observers.

Cabral's understanding of participation is closely connected to his view of the relationship between leaders and the people. He rejected the idea that revolutionary or political leaders should become a separate class above society. Leadership, for him, should remain connected to the experiences and needs of ordinary people. This position reflects Cabral's repeated warning that liberation movements must avoid becoming detached from the populations they claim to represent. He argued that political leadership derives its legitimacy not from military success or elite authority, but from its continuing relationship with the people. Leaders, therefore, have a responsibility to learn from the lived experiences of ordinary citizens and to ensure that political organisation remains accountable to them, rather than becoming an instrument of domination (Cabral, 1979, pp. 89-102). Political leaders should learn from the communities they claim to represent, rather than simply impose decisions upon them (Cabral, 1979, pp. 89-102).

This view has similarities with participatory democratic theory. Carole Pateman argues that democracy becomes meaningful when citizens participate directly in decisions that affect their lives. Participation does not only produce better decisions. It also develops democratic skills and political confidence among citizens (Pateman, 1970, pp. 22-44). Cabral's thought shares this belief that participation transforms citizens themselves. However, Cabral extends the participatory argument in a distinctive way. While many participatory theorists focus on participation within existing democratic institutions, Cabral connects participation with liberation and social transformation. Participation is not merely a method of improving government. It is part of the process through which people overcome conditions of domination.

This connection between participation and liberation is important for understanding why Cabral's thought contributes to decolonial democratic theory. Colonialism did not only control territory and resources. It also created political relationships where Africans were treated as subjects of administration, rather than as active political agents. Therefore, overcoming colonialism requires transforming the relationship between the people and political institutions. Decolonising democracy, from this perspective, means changing the meaning of political participation. It means moving from a system where citizens mainly choose rulers to one where citizens continuously engage in governing processes. A democratic institution should not only ask people who should govern them. It should also create opportunities for people to influence how they are governed.

Cabral sought to translate these principles into political practice through the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC). During the liberation struggle, the movement encouraged political education, local organisation, and community mobilisation in areas under its control. Although these practices emerged within the context of armed struggle, rather than a constitutional democracy. They, nevertheless, reflected Cabral's conviction that ordinary people should participate actively in the political processes shaping their collective future (Chabal, 1983, pp. 96-118; Tomás, 2021, pp. 214-236).

Critics may argue that Cabral's model is unrealistic for modern states. Contemporary African countries have millions of citizens, complex economies, and diverse interests. Direct participation on a large scale may be difficult. Liberal democracy, they argue, developed representative institutions precisely because modern societies cannot function through constant direct involvement of all citizens. This criticism deserves serious consideration. A modern state cannot hold public meetings for every national decision. Representation is necessary. However, Cabral's argument does not require eliminating representation. His contribution is to show that representation without participation creates distance between citizens and political power. The solution is not to replace representative institutions, but to make them more participatory and accountable. This can be seen in practical examples such as participatory budgeting, community consultations, local decision-making forums, and citizens' assemblies. These institutions do not eliminate elected governments. Instead, they create additional spaces where citizens can influence public decisions. Such practices reflect Cabral's belief that democracy should involve continuous interaction between institutions and communities.

Another important element of Cabral's participatory politics is collective responsibility. He believed that political freedom required citizens to see themselves as responsible participants in society (Cabral, 1979). Democracy cannot survive when people view politics only as the responsibility of government officials. A democratic society requires citizens who are willing to question, contribute, and organise. This idea challenges the common political culture where citizens often expect leaders to solve all social problems, while remaining politically inactive. Cabral's approach suggests that democracy is weakened when citizens become spectators. Political institutions may create

opportunities for participation, but citizens must also develop the willingness to use those opportunities.

Cabral's participatory politics, therefore, offers an alternative understanding of democratic legitimacy. A government is not legitimate simply because it wins elections. Legitimacy also depends on whether citizens experience themselves as active participants in political life or not. Political authority becomes stronger when people recognise institutions as expressions of their own collective agency. The argument developed here is not that Cabral provides a complete democratic system that can simply be transferred into contemporary Africa. His ideas emerged within a particular historical struggle and require interpretation. However, the principles underlying his thought remain valuable. Political consciousness, popular participation, and collective responsibility provide important foundations for rethinking democracy beyond electoral competition.

Cabral's contribution to democratic theory is, therefore, not that he rejects liberal democracy completely. Rather, he exposes its limitations. He shows that democracy must involve more than choosing leaders. It must involve creating conditions where people can participate meaningfully in shaping their common life.

Decolonising Liberal Democracy through Cabral

The argument developed in this article is not that Africa should abandon democracy or replace liberal principles with a completely different political system. Such a position would create another form of political universalism. It would assume that one model can simply replace another. The argument is more specific. Liberal democracy in Africa requires reconstruction, because democracy cannot become meaningful when its institutions remain disconnected from the political experiences of the people they are meant to serve.

This is the central meaning of decolonising liberal democracy. Decolonising liberal democracy, therefore, involves both critique and reconstruction. It critiques assumptions that treat one historical form of democracy as universally applicable, while reconstructing democratic institutions around broader forms of participation, agency, and political inclusion. Decolonisation does not mean rejecting every idea that emerged from Western political traditions. It means examining the historical assumptions behind political concepts, and asking whether or not they adequately respond to different social realities. As Walter D. Mignolo argues, decolonial thinking challenges the dominance of knowledge systems that present particular historical experiences as universal models (Mignolo, 2011, pp. 6-14). Similarly, Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that political decolonisation requires attention not only to colonial rule, but also to the continued influence of colonial ideas, institutions, and forms of power after independence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, pp. 77-94).

Contemporary forms of domination are not limited to direct political control. They can also appear through new systems of dependency and external influence. Ugwulebo (2026) argues that postcolonial societies must examine emerging structures of dependence that shape political and social life, especially in the Artificial Intelligence age. This supports

the broader decolonial argument that political reconstruction requires attention to changing forms of power, rather than only historical colonial institutions. Cabral's political philosophy contributes to this project, because he understood liberation as a transformation of both institutions and consciousness. For him, colonialism was not simply the control of territory by a foreign power. It was also a system that shaped how people understood authority, citizenship, and political participation. Therefore, independence could not be complete if colonial patterns of political organisation remained unchanged (Cabral, 1979, pp. 53-72).

This insight is important for understanding the democratic challenges faced by many African states. In several cases, political independence transferred control of the state from colonial authorities to African leaders, without fundamentally transforming the relationship between the state and citizens. The structures of administration remained highly centralised, and ordinary people often continued to experience government as something distant from their everyday lives (Mamdani, 1996, pp. 23-37). Democracy was introduced, but citizens were not always empowered as active participants in political decision-making. Cabral's political philosophy can, therefore, be reconstructed around three interconnected democratic principles, namely, political agency, participatory institutions, and political consciousness. These principles neither represent a complete institutional blueprint for contemporary democracy nor do they replace the achievements of liberal democracy. Rather, they provide a framework for deepening democracy by expanding the meaning of citizenship, participation, and political legitimacy (Cabral, 1974, 1979; Pateman, 1970).

Cabral's participatory politics offers a way of addressing this problem. It does so by placing political agency at the centre of democratic life. Citizens should not be understood merely as individuals who periodically select political leaders. They should also be seen as active participants who contribute to shaping collective decisions. For Cabral, political freedom requires people to develop the capacity to understand their social conditions, organise collectively, and influence the institutions that govern them. Democracy, therefore, depends not only on formal rights but also on the ability of citizens to exercise meaningful political agency.

This understanding of political agency challenges the assumption that democracy begins and ends with voting. Voting is important because it allows citizens to choose leaders. However, if citizens participate only during elections, political power remains concentrated among elites. Cabral's approach suggests that democracy must continue after elections, through public discussion, community organisation, and citizen involvement in governance. A practical example can be found in local government. A council may be elected through a democratic process, but if decisions about development projects, public spending, and community priorities are made without consultation, citizens remain politically excluded. A Cabralian approach would argue that democracy requires communities to participate in these decisions, because they possess knowledge about their own conditions.

This emphasis on participation points to a second dimension of Cabral's democratic reconstruction. That is the importance of participatory institutions. Democratic legitimacy requires institutional spaces where citizens can deliberate, contribute, and influence decisions beyond election periods. Elections remain necessary, but they should be complemented by mechanisms that allow continuous public involvement in governance. In this sense, Cabral's thought supports a broader understanding of democracy, in which institutions are judged not only by their procedures but also by the opportunities they create for citizen participation (Pateman, 1970; Fung, 2015). This emphasis on participatory institutions also demonstrates why democratic structures must remain connected to popular agency. Institutions are not democratic simply because they follow formal procedures. They become democratic when citizens experience them as structures through which they can exercise political influence. This argument challenges a purely procedural understanding of democracy associated with electoral competition and institutional rules (Schumpeter, 1942, pp. 269-283).

This does not mean that procedures are unimportant. Rules, constitutions, and elections protect citizens from arbitrary power. However, procedures without meaningful participation can produce what Ake describes as the appearance of democracy without the substance of democratic empowerment (Ake, 1996, pp. 129-137). A country may have elections and a constitution, while ordinary citizens remain unable to influence major political decisions. Cabral's thought, therefore, expands the meaning of democratic legitimacy. A government is not legitimate only because it has received electoral support. It is legitimate when citizens remain connected to the institutions that exercise power on their behalf. This view shares similarities with participatory democratic theorists, who argue that democracy develops when citizens actively engage in political processes (Pateman, 1970, pp. 22-44; Fung, 2015, pp. 513-522).

A third dimension of Cabral's democratic reconstruction concerns political consciousness and collective responsibility. This emphasis does not replace the liberal achievement of individual rights, which remain essential protections against state abuse. However, Cabral reminds us that democracy also requires citizens to understand their responsibilities toward the wider political community. This point connects with African philosophical debates on communitarianism. Kwame Gyekye argues that African political thought traditionally recognises the relationship between individuals and communities, while still allowing space for individual freedom (Gyekye, 1997, pp. 45-59). Kwasi Wiredu similarly argues that certain African political traditions provide resources for thinking about democracy through dialogue, consensus, and collective decision-making (Wiredu, 1995; 1996). Cabral differs from these thinkers because his emphasis is not only on cultural tradition but also on political transformation. He does not simply argue that African societies have communal values. He argues that people must actively develop the political consciousness required to transform their societies. Participation is, therefore, not only a cultural practice. It is a form of political empowerment.

A possible criticism is that this approach risks romanticising African traditions. Some scholars have warned against assuming that precolonial African political systems

were automatically democratic, or that communal values always produce equality and justice (Hallen, 2019, pp. 1-22). This criticism is valid. African societies, like all societies, contained forms of exclusion and inequality. However, decolonising democracy does not require a return to an imagined past. It requires critical engagement with African intellectual resources. Cabral's relevance does not come from claiming that African traditions were perfect. It comes from his argument that political systems must be connected to the experiences and participation of the people who live within them (Cabral, 1979). This approach has relevance for contemporary debates about democratic decline in Africa.

Recent studies have shown that many African citizens express dissatisfaction, not necessarily with democracy itself, but with the limited nature of democratic practice. They often support democratic ideals while criticising corruption, exclusion, and the lack of accountability among political elites (Cheeseman, 2020, pp. 1-15). This suggests that the challenge is not simply convincing citizens to accept democracy. It is creating democratic systems that respond to their expectations. Cabral's participatory philosophy provides one possible response. It suggests that democracy should be understood as an ongoing relationship between citizens and institutions, rather than a process limited to moments of electoral selection. This does not require eliminating elections or representative government. Instead, it requires adding stronger participatory mechanisms that bring citizens closer to decision-making.

Such mechanisms may include participatory budgeting, citizens' assemblies, community consultation processes, and stronger local government structures. These practices reflect Cabral's belief that political authority should remain connected to ordinary people. They transform democracy from an event into a social practice. The strength of Cabral's contribution is, therefore, not that he provides a complete institutional design for contemporary African states. Rather, he provides a philosophical principle. That democracy must be measured by the extent to which people participate in shaping their collective life. This principle challenges both colonial patterns of political authority and narrow interpretations of liberal democracy.

Cabral's political philosophy, therefore, contributes to democratic theory by expanding the meaning of freedom. Freedom is not only the protection of individuals from oppression. It is also the ability of people to participate in creating the political conditions of their own existence. In this sense, Cabral's participatory politics offers a foundation for rethinking democracy in Africa without abandoning its most important commitments to rights, accountability, and human dignity.

Conclusion

The reconstruction of liberal democracy proposed in this article does not involve abandoning democratic principles or replacing liberal institutions with an entirely different political order. Rather, it involves reconsidering how democratic values such as participation, accountability, and political equality can be institutionalised within African historical and social contexts. Liberal democracy has contributed important ideas such as

constitutional government, protection of rights, accountability, and limits on political power. These principles remain necessary for any democratic society.

This position is consistent with the argument that democratic reconstruction in Africa does not require a complete rejection of liberal principles. Afisi (2023) demonstrates that African democratic thought can engage liberal ideas, while also incorporating communitarian concerns about social responsibility and collective life. The significance of Cabral's participatory politics, therefore, is not that it replaces liberal democracy entirely, but that it expands its meaning by placing popular participation and political consciousness at the centre of democratic practice.

The argument has been that liberal democracy becomes incomplete when it is reduced mainly to elections, representation, and institutional procedures. A political system may conduct regular elections and still leave citizens disconnected from political decision-making. When democracy becomes only a method for choosing leaders, citizens risk becoming spectators, rather than active participants in public life. Cabral's political thought challenges this limited understanding of democracy (Cabral, 1979). Although his writings emerged from the context of anti-colonial struggle, they contain important democratic insights. His emphasis on political consciousness, popular participation, and collective responsibility shows that democracy requires more than formal political rights. It requires citizens who have the capacity and opportunity to participate in shaping their common future.

The article has also considered important objections to reading Cabral as a democratic thinker. His revolutionary background, the political difficulties of post-independence liberation movements, and the challenges of applying participatory democracy in large modern states all create serious questions. These criticisms demonstrate that Cabral's ideas cannot simply be transferred from the liberation struggle into contemporary democratic institutions without modification. However, these objections do not eliminate the democratic value of Cabral's thought. They show the need for philosophical reconstruction. The task is not to reproduce the political structures of the liberation movement, but to identify the democratic principles contained within Cabral's philosophy. And to examine how they can respond to present political challenges.

The central contribution of Cabral is his insistence that political freedom requires active participation. Citizens should not only have the right to choose leaders. They should also have meaningful opportunities to influence political decisions, hold institutions accountable, and participate in shaping public life. Democracy becomes stronger when people experience political institutions as expressions of their own collective agency. This perspective provides an important contribution to decolonial debates. Decolonising democracy does not mean replacing one universal model with another. It means questioning the assumption that democracy has only one legitimate institutional form. It requires recognising that democratic ideas must engage with different historical experiences and social realities.

For African societies, this means moving beyond the question of whether liberal democracy should be accepted or rejected. The more important question is how democracy can be reconstructed so that it becomes more meaningful to citizens. Cabral's philosophy suggests that democratic institutions must be judged, not only by their procedures, but also by the extent to which they encourage participation and political empowerment. Cabral does not provide a complete solution to all democratic challenges facing Africa. No single thinker can do so. However, his ideas offer an important philosophical direction. They remind democratic theory that institutions cannot remain legitimate when citizens are separated from the exercise of political power.

The future of African democracy, therefore, requires both institutional protection and popular participation. Constitutions, elections, and rights must be defended. At the same time, citizens must be placed at the centre of political life. Cabral's participatory politics contributes to this project by showing that democracy is not simply a system of government. It is also a practice through which people collectively create and sustain their political freedom. Cabral's significance for democratic theory, therefore, lies not in providing a finished institutional model, but in offering a critical principle. That democracy must remain connected to the capacity of ordinary people to participate in shaping the political conditions of their own lives.

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