

Undermining of Social Transformation in Africa Through Suppression of Critical Voices by the Ruling Elite

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Abstract

Ruling elites across postcolonial Africa increasingly leverage systematic mechanisms of control to stifle dissenting voices and insulate their authority from reform. This literature review examines how contemporary state actors use media censorship, repressive legislative frameworks, political intimidation, and systemic food insecurity to suppress critical discourse. Drawing on foundational theories of power, hegemony, and postcolonial subjugation, the paper argues that the strategic manipulation of information and access to resources forces populations into survival-driven dependency and weakens opposition. Case analyses from Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Ethiopia illustrate how state-sanctioned violence and legal instruments, often framed as national security measures, undermine democratic evolution and institutional accountability. Ultimately, this study shows that silencing intellectuals, journalists, and activists' paralyzes economic development and entrenches authoritarian governance. The findings underscore an urgent need for comprehensive civic education to dismantle these entrenched power dynamics and foster genuine socio-political transformation.

Keywords: *Social Transformation, Authoritarianism, Postcolonial Governance, Media Censorship, Political Suppression, Resource Dependency, Democratic Stagnation, African Political Economy*

Background

Social transformation is the process through which a society undergoes structural shifts including the prevailing cultural, economic, and political systems. In many societies social transformation is a result of human development, evolved ideology around how people live and interact as well as the emerging need for justice, equity, in societies where those left out in development begin to feel the pressure and start demanding change. Social transformation in Africa like many development facets has proven more difficult than in most parts of the world. Those in leadership and the elite use their power and positions to suppress any emerging critical voices that may threaten the power they enjoy through advocacy for social, political, and economic reforms. Africans are acutely aware of the need for social transformation., they desire it and are actively looking for a solution that would lead to an overhaul and a shared access to all resources within the continents. However, this awareness is tempered by the reality that those who seek to challenge the system often face exclusion from resources, visibility and some time they lose their freedoms and in some extreme cases their lives. The elites in Arica are themselves still students of the colonialists and are still utilizing learnt mechanics of control from the colonial period to construct a disguise of a modern free government. This literature review explores the different mechanisms through which the suppression of opposition impedes social change in African nations, focusing on academic, political, and social perspectives.

Problem Statement and Rationale

Despite the formal adoption of democratic institutions and constitutional reforms across much of postcolonial Africa, the ability of citizens to participate meaningfully in social and political transformation remains constrained in many contexts. Democratic institutions may exist alongside practices that restrict dissent, limit access to information, constrain civil society and create economic and political dependencies. The continued existence of these contradictions raises an important question about the extent to which formal democratic structures are able to facilitate meaningful social transformation when citizens who challenge existing power structures face different forms of suppression.

Existing scholarship has examined individual dimensions of this problem, including media censorship, restrictions on freedom of expression, political violence, restrictive legislation and unequal access to resources. However, these mechanisms are often examined separately. There is comparatively less attention to how they operate together as interconnected mechanisms of power. The suppression of a critical journalist, for example, may not occur independently of restrictive legislation, political intimidation or economic dependency. Rather, these mechanisms can reinforce one another and reduce the capacity of citizens and institutions to question existing systems of power.

This literature review therefore examines the relationship between the suppression of critical voices and social transformation in postcolonial Africa. It focuses on four interconnected mechanisms: media censorship and information control, restrictive legal frameworks, political intimidation and violence, and resource dependency, particularly through access to food and other basic resources. By examining these mechanisms together, the review seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how political power can be maintained through both coercive and dependency-based forms of control.

The review is particularly relevant because social transformation depends not only on the existence of formal institutions but also on the ability of citizens, journalists, intellectuals, civil society organizations and other social actors to question existing arrangements and propose alternatives. Where such voices are systematically restricted, the process of social transformation may be weakened even where democratic institutions formally exist.

Theoretical Framework

This review is informed by theories of power, hegemony and postcolonialism. These perspectives provide a useful basis for understanding why political control may persist beyond the formal end of colonial rule and why the suppression of dissent can take both direct and indirect forms.

The concept of power is central to understanding the relationship between ruling elites and citizens. Power is not exercised only through direct coercion. It can also operate through institutions, laws, information systems and control over resources. From this perspective, the ability of political elites to influence what citizens can say, what information they can access and what resources they can obtain constitutes an important dimension of political power.

The concept of hegemony further helps explain how power may become normalized within society. Hegemonic power does not necessarily depend on continuous physical force. It can operate through institutions and ideas that make existing political and social arrangements appear normal, legitimate or unavoidable. In the context of African societies, control over media institutions, public discourse and access to resources can therefore contribute to the reproduction of existing power relations.

Postcolonial theory provides an additional lens by drawing attention to the continuing influence of colonial structures, practices and patterns of authority after formal independence. The postcolonial perspective is particularly relevant to this review because the political systems examined are shaped by histories in which colonial governments used legal, administrative, economic and informational mechanisms to regulate populations. Contemporary African states should not, however, be treated simply as reproductions of colonial systems. Rather, postcolonial analysis provides a basis for examining how inherited institutional structures interact with contemporary political interests and social conditions.

The media dimension of this argument is supported by scholarship arguing that media systems in postcolonial societies cannot always be adequately understood through models developed primarily from Western democratic experiences. Rodny-Gumede, for example, argues for greater attention to colonial histories and their continuing influence on the media-politics relationship in postcolonial societies. Similarly, Berger's work on media and democracy in Southern Africa emphasizes the need to account for the distinctive political and media conditions within African societies when examining the relationship between media and democratization.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives allow the review to move beyond viewing suppression simply as individual acts of censorship or violence. Instead, suppression is understood as part of broader systems of power through which political, economic and informational resources can be organized in ways that influence citizens' capacity to participate in social transformation.

Literature Review Approach

This paper adopts a thematic literature review approach. The literature is organized around the major mechanisms through which critical voices may be constrained and the consequences of such constraints for social transformation. The themes examined are media censorship and control, legal suppression, political intimidation and violence, resource and food dependency, and the consequences of suppression for democratic and economic development.

The review draws on scholarly literature concerning African governance, media systems, political participation, freedom of expression, authoritarianism, postcolonial governance and social transformation. The literature is considered comparatively, with particular attention to Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia. These cases provide different national contexts through which the relationship between political power, suppression and social transformation can be examined.

Because this paper is presented as a literature review rather than a systematic review, the objective is to synthesize major arguments and identify patterns across the literature rather than to calculate an aggregate effect. A systematic review would require a more explicitly documented search and selection procedure, including databases searched, search terms, dates, eligibility criteria and the number of studies identified and excluded. Such reporting is recommended by PRISMA 2020 for systematic reviews.

Control is not a tool but a way of life

Interconnected Mechanisms of Control

The mechanisms through which critical voices are suppressed should not be understood as isolated forms of control. Media censorship, restrictive legislation, political intimidation and resource dependency can operate simultaneously and reinforce one another. Legal restrictions can provide a formal justification for limiting dissent, while control of media institutions can restrict the visibility of alternative perspectives. Political intimidation can create fear among those who might otherwise challenge the system, while economic and resource dependency can make individuals reluctant to participate in opposition because doing so may threaten their livelihoods or access to essential services.

This interconnectedness is important because social transformation requires more than the formal existence of political institutions. It requires citizens to have the freedom and capacity to exchange ideas, organize, criticize institutions and demand accountability. When information is controlled, laws restrict public participation, dissent is met with intimidation and access to resources becomes dependent on political loyalty, the space available for collective action becomes narrower.

The media is particularly important within this relationship because it connects individual experiences to wider public discourse. Where journalists and media organizations are able to investigate and publicize abuses of power, they can contribute to accountability and public debate. Conversely, when media institutions are subjected to political or economic pressure, abuses may receive less public scrutiny. Scholarship on African media systems has similarly emphasized the complex relationship between media institutions, political power and democratization.

The relationship is therefore better understood as a cycle. Control over information can reduce public awareness; reduced awareness can weaken collective action; weakened collective action can make political control easier to maintain; and continued political control can further strengthen control over information and resources. Social transformation becomes more difficult when this cycle remains intact.

Media Censorship and Control

The media plays a very important role in the social transformation process. This is because it offers a platform for marginalized voices and ideas to reach the public. Unfortunately, in many African countries, media suppression is very common. Governments often exercise control over state-owned media outlets while also exerting pressure on privately-owned ones through legal, financial, or violent means (Hadland, 2015). As posited by Berger, in countries like Rwanda and Ethiopia, media personalities who criticize the government often face harassment and, in some instances, this extends to death threats and assassination attempts. The state's tight grip on information flow prevents the public from engaging in differing political narratives, stifling the debates essential for social change (Berger, 2002).

Legal Suppression: Repressive Laws

Many African countries have prevailing laws that have been enacted for the primary purpose of restricting their citizens' right of expression and freedom of speech. This impedes the activities of civil society organizations which attempt to inform marginalized citizens about their rights. These laws are enacted in the guise of national security measures, anti-terrorism laws, or regulations on public protests. During the protests in Kenya in June and July 2024, the security personnel used laws that have been enacted for purposes of retaining public order and peace to curtail protests against the government, despite the fact that most of the protests were relatively peaceful. In another example, Uganda's Public Order Management Act of 2013 has been criticized for curtailing citizens' rights to protest and express dissent against the government (Mwangu, 2017). In Zimbabwe, laws such as the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (AIPPA) have been utilized to silence journalists and opposition figures, limiting the ability of the public to access critical information (Chirisa & Mukura, 2019).

Political Intimidation and Violence

Violence and political intimidation and violence are some of the most rampant and obvious ways through which dissidents against the elite in African societies are repressed. Members and leaders of opposition leaders, human rights defenders, and activists are often subject to arbitrary arrests, torture, and in some cases, extrajudicial killings. In Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Rwanda, we have seen many cases of arbitrary arrests, disappearance and outright killing of voices that are critical of the government of the day. A recent example is the abduction and unlawful arrests of youth in Kenya who led or were involved in protests against the high cost of living and in particular the Finance Bill, 2024. These actions create a climate of fear, deterring many from speaking out or organizing movements for social reform. According to studies by Human Rights Watch (HRW), in countries like Sudan and Cameroon, state-sponsored violence has effectively silenced political opposition, ensuring that the ruling elite remain in power (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Hunger as a Tool of Suppression

In postcolonial Africa, hunger has been one of the most potent weapons used by ruling elites to suppress critical voices and maintain control over the population. Hunger strips people of their ability to make autonomous decisions, reducing their capacity to challenge the status quo (Kibuthi, 2020). As Fanon (1963) notes in *The Wretched of the Earth*, hunger disempowers individuals, making them focus on survival rather than resistance. Hungry people are not able to consent to or participate in political discourse because their immediate concerns revolve around securing basic needs.

The fear of hunger is equally oppressive. Even when food is accessible, the fear of losing that access binds people to the elite. Those who have power over food distribution can easily manipulate the population, ensuring that they remain dependent and voiceless (Arnold, 2018). In this context, the people understand the need for transformation but are afraid to confront it because of the fear of losing their access to food. This dependency is reinforced by the cultural belief that food is reserved for a select few, those who follow the system and become part of the elite who control access to essential resources (Kibuthi, 2020).

In colonial times, food moved from being a symbol of sustenance to a symbol of control. The colonizers, using

education and religion, defined what was considered food, who was entitled to eat, and where food was found (Fanon, 1963). Food became a reward for the obedient and compliant. This same structure persists today, where leadership and access to resources are seen as rewards for loyalty. Once someone becomes a leader, they are perceived as having control over food distribution, further entrenching the idea that power and food are interlinked.

Impact of Suppression on Social Transformation

The suppression of critical voices in African countries has a direct impact on the social transformation of African societies. The impact affects the societies' democratic institutions and perpetuates social inequalities. The suppression of activists, intellectuals, and opposition figures results in the loss of varying ideas and approached to development and governance. Additionally, it provides the elite with an opportunity to use corrupt means for individual gain because their actions are protected by ill-advised laws or intimidation. In the absence of criticism and opposing views, the elite in the societies use their positions to serve their individual interests at the expense of the entire society.

Stifled Democratic Growth

As posited by (Gibson, 2002), the absence of free and fair political competition, coupled with the suppression of civil society, undermines democratic development. Studies have shown that where dissent is stifled, transitions to democracy are slow, and in many cases, authoritarian regimes become further entrenched (Gibson, 2002).

Economic Stagnation

Oduro, Social and political instability created by the repression of critical voices also discourages economic growth and investment. Without transparency and accountability, which often stem from critical oversight, corruption and mismanagement flourish, leading to inefficiencies that stall social progress (Oduro, 2009).

Synthesis of the Literature

The literature reviewed demonstrates that the suppression of critical voices affects social transformation through multiple and mutually reinforcing pathways. At the informational level, censorship and media control restrict the circulation of alternative ideas and reduce the ability of citizens to scrutinize those in power. At the legal level, restrictive laws can narrow the legitimate space available for protest, criticism and civic organization. At the political level, intimidation and violence create fear and discourage citizens from participating in activities that challenge existing power structures. At the socioeconomic level, dependence on politically controlled resources can reduce individual and collective autonomy.

These mechanisms have a common consequence: they weaken the capacity of society to generate, organize and sustain alternative ideas about governance and development. Social transformation requires contestation because existing institutions and practices must be questioned before they can be changed. When contestation is systematically restricted, existing power structures become more difficult to challenge.

The literature also suggests that suppression does not always operate through visible acts of repression. Some forms of control are direct, such as arrest, violence or censorship, while others operate indirectly through dependency, institutional pressure and unequal access to information and resources. This distinction is important because indirect forms of control may be less visible but can nevertheless have significant consequences for citizens' willingness and ability to participate in social change.

Research Gap

Although considerable scholarship has examined authoritarianism, media freedom, political repression and democratic development in Africa, these areas are frequently examined as separate fields of inquiry. Media

studies tend to emphasize censorship and press freedom; political studies often focus on repression, institutions and political competition; and development studies frequently examine inequality and access to resources. The separation of these dimensions can obscure the ways in which different forms of control interact.

This review therefore identifies a conceptual gap in the literature: insufficient integration of informational, legal, political and resource-based mechanisms of suppression within a single framework for understanding social transformation in postcolonial Africa. Examining these mechanisms together makes it possible to understand suppression not simply as a collection of individual restrictions but as a broader system through which political power can reproduce itself.

The review also identifies a contextual gap. African societies differ significantly in their political histories, institutional arrangements and experiences of conflict and democratization. Consequently, conclusions drawn from one national context cannot automatically be generalized to the entire continent. Comparative attention to Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe and Ethiopia provides an opportunity to identify both common patterns and contextual differences in the relationship between suppression and social transformation.

The contribution of this review is therefore to bring these strands of scholarship into conversation and to propose a more integrated understanding of how the restriction of critical voices can impede social, political and economic transformation.

Implications for Social Transformation

The literature has several implications for efforts to promote social transformation in postcolonial African societies. First, strengthening democratic institutions requires more than the establishment of formal political structures. Institutions responsible for protecting freedom of expression, access to information, civic participation and accountability must also be capable of operating independently of political pressure.

Second, media freedom remains central to social transformation. The media provides an important space through which citizens can encounter competing interpretations of political and social issues. Strengthening independent journalism, protecting journalists from intimidation and ensuring access to public information can therefore contribute to a more open environment for civic participation. Research on African media systems has repeatedly highlighted the importance of understanding media institutions within their specific political and historical contexts rather than assuming that models developed elsewhere can be applied without modification.

Third, civic education is important because citizens need knowledge of their rights and the institutional mechanisms through which those rights can be exercised. However, civic education alone cannot resolve structural forms of suppression. It needs to be accompanied by institutional reforms that protect citizens from unlawful intimidation and ensure that legal frameworks do not unnecessarily restrict legitimate expression, association and participation.

Finally, social transformation requires attention to the socioeconomic conditions within which political participation takes place. Citizens who are economically dependent on political structures may have fewer opportunities to challenge those structures. Consequently, efforts to promote democratic participation should also consider inequality, access to basic services and the distribution of economic opportunities.

The central implication of the literature is therefore that social transformation cannot be separated from the distribution of political, informational and economic power. Creating space for transformation requires not only encouraging citizens to participate but also creating institutional and socioeconomic conditions in which participation can occur without fear or excessive dependency.

Conclusion

The silencing of critical voices in African societies remains a significant impediment to social transformation. Through

media censorship, restrictive laws, political intimidation and resource dependency, the space available for citizens to question existing systems of power can be substantially reduced. The literature reviewed demonstrates that meaningful transformation requires more than formal democratic institutions; it requires an environment in which citizens can access information, express dissent, organize collectively and participate in public affairs without fear of retaliation or loss of essential resources. Strengthening civic education, institutional accountability, media freedom and citizens' socioeconomic autonomy is therefore important to creating conditions in which sustainable social transformation can occur.

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