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The State of African Democracy: Status, Prospects, Challenges

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1. Introduction

It is almost forty years today since Ghana gained her independence in 1956 and joined Ethiopia, Egypt and Liberia as an independent African country. While Ghana was a trailblazer in gaining independence in Sub-Saharan Africa, which was a very positive, and joyous development, she has also been a trailblazer in other instances some of which not as positive. Also she has been a follower in others. Her history reflects what has invariably happened in the rest of Africa: a successful nationalist struggle, independence, optimistic euphoria, military coups, assassinations and betrayal, social movements, social protests and struggles for democracy and livelihood, continued subordination to global capitalism: falling proceeds from exports, rising costs of imports and debt, falling standards of living and declining livelihoods.

Five years ago in 1995 in his introductory chapter to AAPS *State and Democracy in Africa*, volume one, Professor Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja (1997:9) was very optimistic about the future of democracy in Africa. He said and I quote: "Since 1988, the people of Africa have risen to replace one party and military dictatorships with multiparty democracy. From its violent outbreak in October 1985, in the streets of Algiers, this new social movement for democracy has manifested itself all over the continent, changing the rules of the political game and bringing about meaningful reforms in the institutions of the postcolonial state." In this optimism, he was not alone. A few years earlier, another senior colleague Michael Chege (1992) had spoken of an African "surging tide of democracy". Others identified "a general process of political restructuring" (Allen, Baylies and Szeftel, 1992).

The transition to Liberal Democracy by South Africa in 1994 strengthened this seemingly irreversible march, which was regarded as an important feature of the African Renaissance (Mbeki, 1999). The overthrow of Mobutu Seseseko by Laurent Kabila and his then allies Uganda and Rwanda even led to talk of a new generation of African leaders stretching from South Africa through Central and West Africa, many with a Tanzania's – Julius Nyerere touch, but all supposedly eschewing the old politics of dictatorship and authoritarianism, exclusion, division and domination.
In this paper, we try to accomplish four things. First we assess the state of democracy in Africa today. This is done in the following section and is proceeded by a definition of the key concepts. In section three, we seek to explain why democracy has had a checkered existence in Africa so far. Section four sketches out what needs to be done in general and what we have to push the democracy project forward.

2. African Democracy: An Assessment

There are two tales of democracy in Africa. One is as old as Africa herself; the other is younger, more recent, less than a century old. One is the tale and record of the African people's struggle for liberation, popular sovereignty, genuine independence and a people's state. The other one is a tale of liberal democracy.

Liberal Democracy

A consensus exists about the content of Liberal Democracy. It is characterized by a constitutional order and political practices that provide for political representation, participation and accountability through regular competitive elections held under conditions of civil and political liberties guaranteed by the rule of law. These include; individual rights and liberties of expression, association, belief and participation. As Larry Diamond (1991) and Samuel Huntington (1997) maintain, such politics have prudent checks and balances between the executive, judiciary and legislature; minorities and other disadvantaged groups are accorded equal protection; the ability of a political party to influence election outcomes is limited; there are effective guarantees against arbitrary arrest and police brutality; and the press operates freely without censorship.

The literature is awash with numerous yardsticks on whether a country has transited to democracy safely, and if it is consolidating her liberal democracy. Such tests include:

- Valenzuela's (1992) second election test. That is if the new democratic regime lives long enough to survive another national elections following the initial elections that brought it to power. The issue is to determine whether there is a post-founding election for the executive.

- Samuel Huntington's (1991) and Przeworski's (1991) alternation in power hypothesis. That is whether there is a constitutional change of power between two parties that represent two different forces. Whether in post-founding elections, a party loses elections and is peacefully replaced by another. Whether there is surrender of power according to the rules laid down by the constitution.

- Third is D. Rustow's (1970) Longevity test. That is if the liberal democratic regime has survived long enough. In this some argue for twelve years, (Gasiorowski M. J. and Power T. J. 1998) others for even long periods of time.

- Finally, Juan Linz's (1990) Democracy "as the only game in town." This is a situation in which "none of the major political actors, parties, or organized interests, forces or institutions consider that there is an alternative to democratic processes to gain power, and no political institution or group has a claim to veto the action of democratically elected decision-makers." (p.158)

Yet today, the picture in Africa is to say the least very mixed. Even if one leaves out the extreme cases for example Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Congo, Angola, Somalia and Algeria, Rwanda, Burundi and Sudan where there is active or latent armed conflict going on democratic development in many more countries is on trial. No matter the yardstick or standard that is used to measure democratic transition and consolidation, the results cannot be in doubt.

To be sure some countries score well on some of these tests. But even in such instances, undemocratic practices are so numerous to even cast the very validity of the test in doubt. It is true many countries including Cameroon, Gabon, Benin, Ghana, Tanzania, Botswana, Kenya, Uganda, and Namibia easily pass the "second election" test. Yet in most cases such elections have been characterized by unequal playing fields in which the ruling party hordes all the critical resources; are governed by bad constitutions and laws; managed by partisan, subjective and even criminal electoral commissions; and characterized by vote rigging, violence and outright rape

and pillage of people's democratic rights. In countries ranging from Kenya to Algeria to Gabon, Zimbabwe and Mali dominant regimes seem to have a vicious lock on instruments of power, and are prepared to do anything to retain power.

In some countries regime alternation has occurred, notably Benin and Ghana. In many more countries regime alternation has occurred once, yet no one can place a huge bet on the proposition that another regime change will take place in Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania, especially Zanzibar, Uganda, Egypt, Libya, Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Gabon, Cameroon etc. Worse still, new regimes behave like old ones or worse, characteristically wanting to serve for longer periods than constitutionally allowed, and mistreating opponents like the ancient regime.

Also given all that has been paid above, the longevity test has limited relevance for only a few countries. Lastly and most importantly, "democracy" is not yet the only game in town. This applies not only for those in opposition wanting to gain power, but also for those in power that want to keep it. The increase in civil wars and civil strife, and attempts to change constitutional provisions that limit terms of office, all attests to this fact. All in all, it is hard to escape the conclusion that liberal democracy is not fairing well in Africa.

Popular Democracy

Democracy as Yash Tandon (1979:1) observed more than twenty years ago, is not just an idea. "Democracy is a material question. It concerns the lives of people in their daily struggles for material existence" or what Shivji (2001) calls "popular livelihoods." This involves first relations of production, especially property relations the ownership and control of the productive forces, the means of livelihoods. For our case, it inevitably also relates to our position in the global division of labor. Secondly it involves the state and state power, as well as institutions. Finally it involves modes of social organization of society. In brief popular democracy has an economic political and social dimension within a nationalist and African framework.

The state of popular democracy in Africa is inevitably as checkered if not more so than that of Liberal Democracy. It is true that there are thousands upon thousands of Non-governmental Organizations (NGO's) as well as community based organizations (CBO's) in Africa today, yet most of these are barred by law from engaging in politics. There are many more professional organizations in Africa today than twenty or even ten years ago, yet most of these are supposed to cater for the professional needs of their members. Africa has more churches and religious organizations than ever before, but those that venture into politics do so at their own peril for the separation of religion and state and the formal exclusion of the former from politics is jealously maintained. Africa's workers and peasants are more aggrieved now than ever before. They have borne most of the costs of structural adjustment policies including loosing their jobs and livelihoods; selling or rather giving up their crops for next to nothing at times on loan to middlemen and women; they have been pressured into choosing between hunger, ignorance, going naked, or even death as they have struggled to meet the costs of health, education and well being of themselves and families etc. Yet their cooperative unions, farmers' associations and Trade Unions are weak, and constrained in most African countries.

However, you can never hold people down forever, and Africa has been countless "outbreaks of democracy", to use Ricardo Blaug's (1999:145) words. These are instances of popular anti-status quo political activity and protest. As Blaug puts it, (p.145) "in an outbreak of democracy there is a sudden recovery of politics, an awakening, a process of political renewal … it begins with a sudden challenge to political power."

The Agonis is Nigeria's Delta region; University Students who protest the shameful deterioration in education; women and men who refuse to pay unjust taxes, peasants who refuse to move off the land of their ancestors and many more are all instances of such outbreaks of democracy. However such outbreaks have often been put down and their participants killed, or jailed. Such outbreaks come up and die down.

3. Why is the Democracy Project not Working

Two major related factors explain the checkered history of Democracy in Africa today. One lies in the extension and continued domination of the logic of the colonial state. The other one emanates from the limitations inherent in the ongoing restructuring of global capitalism or globalization.

The Colonial Legacy

As many colleagues have demonstrated, the colonial state faced hard choices in the aftermath of the second war, as returning African soldiers united with aggrieved workers organized in trade unions, enlightened intellectuals organized in professional organizations, peasants and kulak farmers organized in cooperative unions, market women, verandah boys, the lumpen salariat, petty traders and shopkeepers and many more all demanding redress through calls for independence. We wish to suggest that the early phase of the struggle for Independence witnessed a critical conjuncture between forces representing liberal democracy, and those representing popular people's democracy.

As Yash Tandon (1979:48) has correctly observed, our nationalist leaders from Cairo to Cape Town and Doula to Dar es Salaam were able to "combine the economic with the political, to collect the small eddies of grievances of our people based on narrow class differences into a torrential main stream of broad, democratic and nationalist struggle." The result was a powerful nationalist movement whose force could not be resisted. To be sure these struggles did not emerge from the blue. They were forced and fed by material conditions of colonial exploitation domination and poverty. They were a continuation of struggles that had been going on quietly or loudly, underground or above ground, in mass movements, people's uprisings and social protest since the colonial invasion and protest as will be argued shortly. They were the successors to the many wars of African resistance to colonial invasion and colonial rule.

The besieged colonial state responded cunningly to the above by driving a wedge between political and social movements. While allowing Political Parties to operate legally, they set down conditions that social movements had to fulfill and continuously observe in order to be registered and continue to operate. Critically, they had to be apolitical. While legalizing political parties, they depoliticized civil

society organizations, and neutralized social movements. As Mahmood Mamdani (2000:229) correctly observes, "it was a deft movement, which served both to emancipate social and ideological pluralism. It drove a wedge between political and social movements"; while political parties flourished for a while, social movements atrophied. The umbilical code that tied political parties to popular classes and the mass of the population was severed. Eventually this was to prove fatal also for political parties for when the soldiers left the barracks for the champagne at State House; political parties had no protectors and defenders. Many simply wilted away. The sorry story's of President Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party (CCP) was to be repeated over and over in many African countries. Secondly the severance of the connection led to the bureaucratization of both the parties and professional associations, cooperative, trade unions etc. Effective accountability and representation through popular democratic participation and oversight gave way to personalism and eventually single party dictatorship on the one hand, and to managerialism and reliance on bureaucratic controls that eventually fell victim to corruption that was itself not unrelated to single party domination. This move elitized politics.

The resultant independence constitutions were informed by a similar colonial logic and buttressed by the above described political and institutional arrangements. Whether based on Westminster or "Gaulist" models, these constitutions were based on limited government and individual rights on the one hand, and multiparty electoral process i.e. liberal democracy on the other (Shivji, 2001:2). Several things need to be appreciated. First these constitutions reinforced the economic and juridical-political logic of the colonial state. Politics became a game of the elite organized in political parties that had an increasingly tenuous connection with society.

Secondly, the depoliticization and neutralization of civil society organizations and social movements continued and was in some instances reinforced. Some of these movements were banned outright, and their leadership detained or even criminalized. Those utterly unlucky were assassinated. Other social movements were forcibly made appendages of the party. Young peoples' organizations became the Youth League; Women's organizations became the party's Women's wings and so the farce continued. Thirdly and finally, the above weakened both parties and civil society on the one hand and made it easy for the single party and the great leader to emerge. The rest is history.

The above story is important in order for us to be able to clearly appreciate the current condition. What is the logic that drives the current African State? Is it different from the logic of the colonial state? It is impossible to say yes to the second question. The logic is still the same. It derives from the historical mode of Africa's incorporation into the world capitalist system and the driving and or dominant forces of that process. The African State derives its continued logic and continuously serves to maintain the mode of this incorporation.

Relatedly, the institutional arrangements especially modes of parties and social movements that we have reviewed above were devised to safeguard and protect the above. The separation of parties and social movements, the elite and the masses, were critical in instituting a liberal democracy that while curbing popular demands and struggles served to provide for non-threatening inter-elite competition. The story of how this played out has been told over and over, and there is no need to repeat it here.

We wish to submit that liberal democracy is not fairing well the second time around because the model and logic of politics and organization is still the same. Allow for non-threatening politics; drive a wedge between politics and economics on the one hand, and between political struggles and economic and social struggles on the other. Force the latter to be presented and pursued in a technicised manner as issues of "Good Governance". Legalize political parties but make the link between them and social organizations and movements illegal.

The irrelevance and uselessness of our current political parties as currently constituted and constrained are there for all of us to see. In Kenya, the struggle for a new constitution is being waged not by parties but mainly by civic groups and social organizations. Current struggles for popular democracy in Algeria is led by Berbers or Islamists. In Nigeria the struggle by the people in the Delta against Oil Giant Shell and the State is also not let by political parties. Even in Zimbabwe, ZANU PF has only recently re-heard the people's outcry for land. From Alexandria in Egypt to Alexander in Johannesburg South Africa, from Goree in Dakar Senegal to Gaborone in Botswana, and from Tripoli in Libya to Tanga in Tanzania, political parties are currently election machines for beauty contests to political office. As long as they cannot strongly link their struggles with those of social organizations, they remain like "fish out of the water". On the other hand, social organizations and movements remain leaderless; their grievances scattered, narrow and localized.

Democracy and the Free Market

Secondly and relatedly, for us to explain the difficulties of democracy in recent years, we also need to explore the conditions specific to this wave in space and time. This is important because of an otherwise curious paradox. Why is it that those who do not care for Africa and Africans, and black people in particular all of a sudden became interested in Africa? Why is it that the American Intellectual reactionary right that provided the intellectual content of Reagan's movement at Stanford, are the same people who led by Larry Diamond have carried the banner of the current democratization wave through the *Journal of Democracy*, books, conferences and workshops etc. Are they disinterested missionaries? Why is it that the very same people, who have led to the death of millions of Africans through denial of education and especially health and drugs through their structural adjustment policies informed as it is by the Washington consensus, are self-declared advocates of "good governance" conditionalties, including electoral democracy?

We wish to suggest to you that the answer lie in the fact that the current wave is made necessary and demanded by the current needs of international capitalism, ideologically presented as globalization. The current wave of liberal democracy in Africa has its roots in the restructuring of the international capitalist system that has been going on more noticeably since the late nineteen seventies. With Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher as the ideological flag bearers, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as the executioners and enforcers, and Transnational Corporations and International capital as the chief movers and beneficiaries, structural adjustment demands were made and or imposed.

Earlier forms of SAPS simply called for the introduction of a bundle of macro economic policies to reduce deficits and eliminate inflation. They were anchored by

tremendous pressure to redefine state functions, reduce the size and role of the state in favor of the market, reduce or eliminate entirely the state enterprise sector etc. These policies were initially pursued through an intensive engagement between the international forces and the one party/authoritarian state officials.

It however, gradually became clear that what Thomas Friedman (1999) characterizes as the "electronic herd" which moves vast amounts of capital in and out of countries, will require very free markets, transparency, and flexibility (Waltz, 1999:694). It required free markets in which as John Gray (1998:1) puts it "prices of all goods including labor changed without regard to their effects on society". This involved not only shrinking the state in size, role and functions while making it more transparent, but also implementing policies that deepened commodity production, freed markets and made everything market friendly.

We suggest to you that such conditions could never co-exist with popular democracy. The above could only be possible by effective insulation from "democratic deliberation and political amendment" (Gray, p. 17). This is so for in the final analysis as Gray (p. 17) puts it very well, "free markets are creatures of state power and persist only so long as the state is able to prevent human needs for security and the control of economic risk from finding political expression". Popular democracy and the free market are rivals, not allies. As Archie Mafeje (1992:34) puts it aptly, "no country can combine a crisis of accumulation with popular democracy". And so enters Liberal Democracy of the Third Wave. Politically, liberal democracy is the answer Diamond (1996) argues: "the end of the Cold War and the collapse of communism have discredited all models other than liberal democracy". It has several advantages for the status quo:

1. Provides a safety valve for grievances and discontent of long standing, but aggravated by the implementation of SAPS.

2. Provides the middle class in the making avenues to influence policies and even assume reigns of power peacefully. Just as the bourgeoisie successfully replaced the feudal order in the 19th century through similar political institutional arrangements.

3. Depoliticizes the bureaucracy and state management, so that their actions are driven by rationality rather than politics which is regarded as dysfunctional and corrupting.

4. Provide for effective and efficient management of public affairs that is transparent and accountable to the middle classes and international forces and that facilitates, promotes and results in good governance.

While it is true that the African masses have never seized to struggle for democracy, there is need to concede that the liberal democracy project is a hijacking of that struggle for something that is formally democratic and progressive, but substantively empty. Liberal democracy of the Third Wave clocks itself in legality rather than legitimacy. It promotes "good governance" that is managerial and status quo oriented and that can only allow for growth, rather than leadership that must pursue structural transformation. Governance we submit is not Leadership.

4. Concluding Remarks

We wish to suggest that even if Liberal Democracy was pushed to its logical limits, to a situation where the tests mentioned above were passed, grave economic, political and social problems would still remain. Countries like Botswana illustrate this point very clearly and demonstrate fully the limits and contractions of liberal democracy. Even with her celebrated multi-party democracy and prudent economic management, massive poverty abounds, and what the late President Julius Nyerere observed more than thirty years ago still obtains. That is: To the masses of our people, power is still something wielded by others against them or their interests and often on their behalf.

The struggle for popular democracy must be waged until our people have power and say in their own lives, until our countries have power and say in the global world. To this end, the quest for popular democracy must continue to be waged. We must go beyond liberal democracy by deepening and widening, it, and eventually transforming it qualitatively.

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