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Africa’s Other Story

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Africa’s history of dictatorship and authoritarian politics has led many scholars and pundits to use several appellations to describe African states: rogue, failed, virtual, soft, weak, collapsed, and illegitimate. These adjectives do indeed capture governance in some African countries today, but they do not tell the full story of Africa’s political advancement and innovations since the end of the cold war.

The last decade has witnessed considerable enthusiasm in Africa for the constitutional enshrinement of democratic and public freedoms. The list of success stories is long and impressive. In Ghana, Niger, and Gambia, military dictators shed their bloodied khaki uniforms for civilian garb. Marxist-Leninist Angola and Mozambique embraced market-economy principles. In Malawi and Kenya, civilian dictators were forced to accommodate the hitherto “dangerous” ideas of constitutionalism and multipartism, and almost everywhere else on the continent, civil societies, generously aided by Western nongovernmental entities, persistently and courageously pushed for transparency and accountability in government. These democratic values are slowly but steadily transforming African politics.

Academic and popular analyses of the African condition have failed to acknowledge this progress (one exception is UCLA professor Richard Sklar, who has brought positive attention to Africa’s political innovations in democratic and federalist thought aimed, for example, at controlling the problems of ethnic discord). But the few voices of positive real-

ism are often drowned by those of negativity. The result is inadvertent preservation of the primitive archetype and the diminution of Africa’s triumphs in governance and democracy.

Of course, the continent is still tormented by seemingly intractable developmental problems that attract authoritarianism. In addition, urban poverty, disease, unemployment, illiteracy, and multiethnicity (to name just a few concerns) conspire against democratic governance. Of these, Africans have shown the greatest creativity in handling politically explosive ethnic tensions.

POLYETHNIC POLITICS

Ethnic divisiveness has been the scourge of competitively elected governments in many African countries, such as Angola, Benin, Chad, Guinea, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Some of these countries have introduced innovative political instruments to tackle this vexing problem. These include the convening of a sovereign national conference in Benin, the implementation of three-tier federalism and federal character principles in Nigeria, the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, and the institution of new forms of government, such as polyethnic federalism in Ethiopia and “partyless” democracy in Uganda.

As experimental forms of government, neither Ethiopia’s ethnic federalism nor Uganda’s no-party government is entirely new, but their introduction indicates a certain courage and determination to explore new ways of self-government that fit the conditions of liberal democracy and local realities.

Benin’s convening of a sovereign national conference—a constitutional conference with full

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sovereign powers—was, however, an “authentic African contribution to the theory and practice of democracy,” according to Sklar. The conference, which was convened in 1990, acted as a political instrument through which the autonomous powers of disparate social groups in the Republic of Benin were mobilized against the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship of President Mathieu Kérékou, who at the end of the conference was forced to surrender supreme power. A transitional government was followed by the election in 1991 of Nicéphore Soglo as the new president of Benin. (However, in 1996 Sogolo lost his reelection bid to Kérékou, who was reelected in 2001 when he once again defeated Sogolo in the general election.)

The idea soon migrated. Between 1990 and 1993, six other francophone African countries—Zaire (now Congo), Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Togo, Niger, and Chad—conducted national conferences. Currently, pro-democracy movements in Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country, have made calls for a sovereign national conference central to their attempt to revise the terms of association among the country’s many polarized nationalities.

Of course, the invention of sovereign national conferences in Africa is not the cure-all for the continent’s protracted transitions to democracy. Far from it.¹ It is simply one example of the many creative ways that new political generations in Africa are seeking to solve the problem of authoritarian rulers continuing to hang on to power in one corrupt election after another. The general identification of faulty democratic transitions and other types of political problems in Africa is useful, but to do so at the near exclusion of reporting the honest and creative efforts of ordinary Africans to counter these problems feeds the endemic Afropessimism first discussed in this journal by Michael Chege several years ago.²

¹For example, while successive elections in Benin are a good sign about the grounding of democracy, there is fear in the country that Kérékou, who has recently scheduled local elections for this December, may amend the constitution to enable him to remain in power. This would dim the prospect for democratic consolidation in Benin.

²Michael Chege, “What’s Right with Africa?” *Current History*, May 1994.

QUIET REVOLUTIONS

A quiet political revolution is rippling throughout Africa. A shower of new political parties is washing away the corrupt one-party systems born during the cold war. The movement for progressive change is evident almost everywhere in the African political universe. As political scientist Julius Ihonvbere of the Ford Foundation recently put it in a speech at Lagos State University in Nigeria, this and other developments in Africa “represent a breath of fresh air.” “In place of military dictatorship,” he noted, “we are seeing civilianized military juntas as in the Gambia, Ghana, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In place of endless murderous wars, we are seeing pacted [sic] conflict resolution initiatives[, such] as in Sierra Leone, Liberia,

Ethiopia, Eritrea, and even Rwanda. In short, all over the continent, the discourse of politics now reflects issues of social and economic rights,

gender equality, transparency, constitutionalism, and the cultivation of democratic values.”

At first flush, the “civilianization” of the military may not look like a gain for democracy. Civilianization describes the political transformation of African military dictators to civilian presidents, usually through rigged elections. It is military rule in civilian vernacular, a unique form of diarchy. But this can be a positive first step toward democratization. Ghana’s Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, a former military dictator who became a civilian president, is the quintessential example of the concept of civilianization. Rawlings overthrew the government in 1979 but relinquished power to an elected government. However, he overthrew the same government in 1981 and promptly abolished the constitution, suppressed dissent, and executed political opponents. His civilianization was inaugurated in 1992 and validated in 1996 when he won free presidential elections. Rawlings’s transition from an initially very bloody military autocrat to a kinder and gentler constitutional democrat appeared so thorough that the Clinton administration granted him a high-profile state visit to the White House.

Africans are also introducing new political structures that are clearly different or are modifications of the models inherited from their colonial rulers in the late 1950s. In Nigeria the dual federalism system of regions and central government midwifed by

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FINDING TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION

SOUTH AFRICA PROVIDED a remarkable political innovation in the form of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established by the African National Congress to investigate political crimes during the apartheid era. The commission's aim was to promote reconciliation in South Africa's segregated society through an authentic revelation of the country's apartheid past. This was a novel experiment in the healing of a crime against humanity. Rather than physical punishment, the perpetrators of the crime of apartheid were granted amnesty after making a full confession of their crimes; mere exposure of their role in crimes committed under apartheid was sufficient penalty.

This judicial model is not entirely foreign to traditional African politics. In the democratic polity of the Igbo of eastern Nigeria, for example, the parading of a thief in the marketplace is a sufficient sentence and deterrent for the crime of stealing. In South Africa, in addition to exposure of criminals, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made it possible for the victims of apartheid

to revisit the trauma of the past to prepare them for a better and harmonious togetherness with all communities of the new South Africa.

Unsurprisingly, the modern idea of truth and reconciliation has spilled over from South Africa to Nigeria, where years of military dictatorship led to horrific abuses of human rights and impoverishing crimes of economic corruption. Nigeria's equivalent to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is the Human Rights Violations Investigation Commission, or simply the Oputa Panel, after the commission's popular chairman, Justice Chukwudifu Oputa. Because the panel does not enjoy the level of power invested in its South African counterpart, however, it may not be as magnanimous because of the pressures of Nigeria's very vocal human rights community, which insists that the past three military governments of Generals Ibrahim Babangida, Sani Abacha, and Abdulsalami Abubakar be held liable for their human rights abuses. Still, the inauguration of Nigeria's Oputa Panel attests to the desirable political values and attempts at societal healing found in the South African example.

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Britain in the late 1950s on the eve of political independence has been considerably remodeled. The normal federal setting (as practiced in the United States, for example) is one in which local governments are dependent on state governments. Under Nigeria's new three-tier federalism, elected local government councils enjoy both constitutional endorsement and federal government funding that is independent of the domineering state governments. This is a completely new addition to the theory and practice of federalism.

Initially, state governments tried to derail the financial independence of the local governments by siphoning off the federal allocations due to the latter. This introduced an initial friction in the implementation of three-tier federalism. The situation was redressed by the 1989 constitution, which provided for a system of federal allocations to the local government that bypassed the state governments. Unfortunately, the result is that financially buoyant local government leaders have become as corrupt as their federal and state counterparts. Still, the primary purpose of the three-tier federal system of

increasing real political participation and bringing government closer to local Nigerian communities has been achieved in practice.

Citizens in some African countries have turned to making new constitutions a strategy to replace strangulating regimes. This constitution-making process has been enthusiastically more inclusive than elitist, with the involvement of nationality groups, trade unions, women, religious groups, youth, students, and even prisoners. The creation of the Eritrean constitution is a successful example of this openness; every effort was made to involve all pertinent interest groups in the country. The result is a near universal acceptance by Eritreans of the legitimacy of their constitution. This widespread acceptance of the constitution imbues it with a special significance and strength.

The languages of some of the new African constitutions have also been made "people friendly" (for example, the new constitutions of Ghana, South Africa, and Uganda). In the past, constitutions in African countries were written in highly technical European languages understood by only a few educated Africans. This postcolonial elitism was devastatingly antidemocratic, but it served the dictatorial ambitions of African governments during the cold war years. Not so today. For millions of ordinary Africans, this is progress.³

³Diverse outreach strategies and public education methods were employed to teach national constitutions to most of the citizenry. In Ghana, Uganda, and South Africa, specific agencies were charged with the responsibility of educating citizens on the provisions of the new constitutions.

AFRICAN DEMOCRACY'S STAYING POWER

The question today for Africa is whether the advances in democracy will last, or whether they will become as elusive as economic development has been. Experimentation and innovations in democracy should continue because Africa has a new determination to domesticate—to adapt to local conditions—the different models of democracy borrowed from the West.

The first attempts at democracy in Africa at the end of colonialism failed woefully. While a major reason included external interference in Africa's domestic politics during the cold war, many African politicians now realize that the institutional framework for democracy in postcolonial Africa was especially weak.

Consider, for example, the conduct of political parties in many African countries immediately after the demise of colonialism. We often forget that at independence, African politicians were mainly graduates of a colonial, authoritarian political culture—a background that did not include the toleration of political opposition. These politicians were expected to govern through a system of parliamentary democracy that required a free and unimpeded opposition. The institutionalization of an opposition required by the imported Westminster model of parliamentary democracy failed in many anglophone African countries (of which Ghana and Nigeria were notorious examples). The result was a nefarious regime of military coups that reintroduced

the familiar territory of colonial-style authoritarian rule that barred political disagreement. Today the situation is radically different. Opposition politics has found a more sympathetic political milieu on the continent. Important transfers of power from ruling parties to opposition parties have occurred in Zambia, Malawi, and most recently, Ghana.

Many African states have also taken the unprecedented step of making military coups illegal in their new constitutions. And some have taken corrective constitutional steps to reduce the influence of the ethnic motivations for military coups. Ethiopia's new constitution, for example, requires that the composition of the national armed forces equitably reflect the national makeup. Putting in place constitutional provisions against military coups is an important supporting step for the democratization project.

THE WHOLE STORY

Africa's well-known developmental political problems remain, including instability, authoritarianism, nepotism, patrimonialism, prebendalism, and the ubiquitous corruption. But these problems also exist in political communities in every other part of the world. More important, they do not exhaust the story of politics in Africa. For every horrific political story in Africa, there is another story of courageous and creative political enterprise accomplished under circumstances that those who live and vote in developed democracies could not even begin to imagine. ■