



The Question of Democracy in Africa

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Every century in Africa brings a new challenge to its socio-economic and political developments. This 21st century is witnessing mass campaign for the democratization of the continent, and a free market or capitalistic economy. As it has always been, the western powers or the colonial masters of pre-independent Africa are the leading proponents of this campaign through intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. But can they really succeed in democratizing the continent as they succeeded in plundering its resources during colonial and imperial dominance? Or is the western democracy a model so strange to African political lives and cultures that Africans found difficulties in adjusting their lives and ways of governance to its tenets; or is it that the Western-support democracy and capitalism are canopies to continually submit Africa to imperial dominance? These are questions African politicians and technocrats need to consider in their efforts to unite the continent; and must also be careful of the numerous demands of the Western powers in securing certain interest. Because it has become commonplace that when these demands are not met, and when certain interests are not achievable, African leaders are quickly branded as ‘predators of democracy’, ‘human rights violators’, and so forth.

Early this year (2008) the People’s Daily (Chinese Communists newspaper) carried an editorial that claimed that western democracy is the cause of some of the violent conflicts in Africa. That article was a commentary on the then post-election violence in Kenya. This claim could be one side of the complex problems facing Africa. But there are more that the leaders of the continent need to understand and make both legal and institutional reforms in their styles of governance. This may save succeeding generations from ideological misconceptions and undue submission to pseudo-imperialism.

But what remains empirical and doubtless is that Africa’s major political crisis is centered on the quest for wealth creation and class or sectarian interest promotion against

that of the masses. African leaders have most often used their offices as industries of profiteering and neglecting the conditions of the people they serve. This is evident by the gross underdevelopment of the continent and the many corruption cases against African leaders. But most often, those that fall in the anti-corruption dragnets may not necessarily be hooked because of the crime, but because of an inherent malice in their successors or attempts to eliminate or degrade a particular class.

These practices of selective justice and cronyism are bad omens in the efforts to democratize Africa. The West has affirmed a resounding commitment in fighting corruption in Africa. The World Bank and other Breton Wood institutions, and major donor agencies and nations are setting benchmarks that nations should meet before they are qualified for grants, aids or loans. Among these benchmarks are 'rule of law', 'good governance' and 'transparency and accountability'. But how trustworthy is the commitment of those institutions and nations to support the growth and development of Africa in the wake of conspicuous hypocrisies and prejudices- something already branded as 'neocolonialism'. Some African leaders whose regimes have poor human rights records are succeeding in getting aids due to their submission to the whims and caprices of those institution and nations, while others that are bent on repelling 'neocolonialism' are left to be strangulated economically, thereby creating political instabilities in their countries.

With the numerous raw materials and physical human resources, democracy is possible in Africa if the leaders can efficiently exploit the resources and support home-base economic development and empower their citizens to become movers and shakers of their own economy. Western and foreign industries and merchants have from time immemorial played decisive roles in the governance of African states. Realistically, their interests had never been in the development of the continent and its people, but clever methods of using African heads-of-states to partner with them in pillaging the resources of the continent. If Africans become permanent movers of their economy, their chances of determining their governance become higher, thus the leadership and governance will be left in their own hands, and neocolonialism may extinct and live only as a concept in the minds of its agents.

As the adage goes, 'Man best servant is himself', the West and any other powerful group of nations can not succeed in building durable democracy in Africa without the Africans as the forerunners. The success of democracy in Africa is dependent upon the leaders of Africa and their people. In recent time three unfavorable situations have occurred in Africa that are seriously threatening the survival of democracy on this continent. The ongoing electoral crisis in Zimbabwe is one among the three that demonstrate the archaic egoistic nature of African leaders to remain in power until their death. The possibility of having a democratic re-run election reflecting the true will and voice of the people of Zimbabwe is a razor-thin due to the continuous fears and harassment against opposition supporters by the ZANU- PF and its pro-militias. President Mugabe's assertion that oppositions will never taste power until his death is sufficient to express that he is the 'one and only one to decide for that nation', and that the popular people of Zimbabwe have no stake in determining who leads them. Even if he really wins the popular vote of

the people, expressions by senior security officials and actions against oppositions can render the process incredible because the people's true decision is not only the vote, but the level of freedom they have to express themselves truly determines the presence of democratic governance. But it is a challenge to the African Union and the Southern Africa Development Community to move with genuine and decisive interventions and insure that the true voices of the Zimbabweans are reflected through their votes fearlessly.

The Kenyan post-electoral crisis was a frustration to many who see Kenya as a success story in Africa where incumbent Kibaki and his PNU allegedly rigged the elections. The controversies surrounding the announcement of results and international opinions on its incredibility ignited massive protests that took away thousands of lives and destroyed millions of dollars worth of properties. This undemocratic practice open a new page in the lives of all Kenyans with the sowing of seeds of tribal conflicts, and the vivid expression that no African nation can boast of peace due to the uncontrollable rapacity of its leaders. Nigeria had the same case in 2007 with the reelection of the PDP taking no glory of credibility and fairness from independent observers. The PDP arrangement and status quo, still at the helm of power maintains the result of what was generally declared as 'fraudulent'. More of such cases, coup attempts (Liberia, Malawi, Comoros, etc), and ceaseless civil wars (Darfur, Somalia, etc) are reported yearly around the continent. So this is 21st century Africa in the struggle for democracy.

To succeed in this advocacy of democratizing this continent, Africans need massive education of African culture of politics before the colonial period. The study of traditional African ways of governance is essential to know how the Africans governed themselves before their 'masters' came, because Julius Nyerere, the Mwalimu, had said that "the traditional African society, whether it had a chief or not – and many, like my own, did not – was a society of equals and it conducted its business through discussion... 'They talk till they agree'. That gives you the very essence of traditional African democracy".

This strive of democratization must also consider as secondary, the building of an African regulated market system to enable the continent become self-sufficient, and not only as a source of raw materials, but also a market of finished products. The numerous partnerships foreigners are building with Africa are intended to build their markets and strengths in the competition to control Africa's resources, and to establish allies in Africa for support in future conflicts that may erupt among them as they all strive to control the continent. It is another challenge to the African leaders and the African Union or other regional bodies in Africa to strengthen their members and citizens politically and economically in building democratic governance which is the prime ingredient of sustaining peace on the continent, and liberating it from the wave of neocolonialism. Again, the need for fiscal probity in governance, and the self-sufficiency of the continent are very vital to the process of democratizing the continent, because the vulnerability of the African people to 'everything that comes' has been underpinned by uncontrolled avarice and corruption in governance, the insufficiency of basic commodities and the economic hardship face by the people.

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