



The Democracy Before Democracy in Africa

Since the dawn of African independence from colonialism in the early 1960s, African liberation leaders and founding fathers qua dictators, military junta and “new breed” leaders have sought to justify the one-man, one-party state — and avoid genuine multiparty democracy — by fabricating a blend of self-serving arguments which converge on the notion that in Africa there is a democracy before democracy.

The core argument can be restated in different ways: Before Africa can have political democracy, it must have economic democracy. Africans are more concerned about meeting their economic needs than having abstract political rights. Economic development necessarily requires sacrifices in political rights. African democracy is a different species of democracy which has roots in African culture and history. African societies are plagued by ethnic, tribal and religious conflicts which can be solved not by Western-style liberal democracy but within the framework of the traditional African institutions of consensus-building, elder mediation and conciliation. Western-style democracy is unworkable, alien and inappropriate to Africans because the necessary preconditions for such a system are not present. Widespread poverty, low per capita incomes, a tiny middle class and the absence of a democratic civic culture render such a system incongruous with African realities. Liberal democracy could come to Africa only after significant economic development has been achieved. Any premature introduction or misguided imposition of it by the West could actually harm Africans by destroying their budding faith in democracy itself.

Stripped of rhetorical flourish, such self-serving arguments exploit manifest contradictions and deficits in African societies for the purposes of justifying the consolidation and fortification of the powers of the one-man, one-party state, and preventing the institutionalization of a competitive multiparty democratic process with electoral and constitutional accountability. The claim of primacy of “economic democracy” is based on an impressionistic (not empirically substantiated) assumption that the masses of poor, illiterate, hungry and sick Africans are too dumb to appreciate “political democracy”. In other words, the African masses are interested in the politics of the belly and not the politics of democracy and political rights. Africans live for and by bread alone. Elections, legal rights and liberties are meaningless to the poor and hungry masses. This assumption is pure nonsense as various well designed and executed empirical studies of democratic attitudes in Africa have shown. The claim of ethnic conflict to justify the one-man, one-party system is internally self-contradictory. If indeed the communalism and the institutions of traditional, pre-colonial African societies are the most effective means for dispute



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resolution and consensus-building, it is illogical to insist on investing a single leader and his party with sweeping and expansive powers.

All the layered sophistry and paralogism of African dictators is intended to mask their insatiable hunger for power and produce one set of self-serving axiomatic conclusions: Africa is not yet ready for genuine multiparty democracy. The one-man, one-party system is the only means to save Africa from itself, and from complete social, economic and political implosion. The one-man, one-party system will evolve into a genuine multiparty democracy at some undetermined time in the future. In the meantime, the one-man, one-party show must go on.

Post-independence African history is instructive in understanding the scourge of the one-man, and the curse of one-party rule in Africa. Ghana's independence from colonialism as the first sub-Saharan African country in 1957, and the role played by its first prime minister and later president Kwame Nkrumah is central to understanding the pervasive problem of civilian and military dictatorships in Africa. Ghana was undoubtedly the most economically and socially advanced country in sub-Saharan Africa with an advanced educational system and relatively well-developed infrastructures when it gained its independence. Nkrumah was a role model for the dozens of leaders of African countries that achieved independence in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite Nkrumah's status as the unrivalled champion of Pan-Africanism and strong advocacy for a united Africa, he was also the single individual most responsible for casting the mold for the one-man, one-party dictatorship in post-independence Africa. Barely a year into his administration, the once fiery anti-colonial advocate of political rights and democracy had transformed himself into a power-hungry despot. He enacted a law making labor strikes illegal. He declared it was unpatriotic to strike. Paranoid about his opposition, he enacted a preventive detention act which gave him sweeping powers to arrest and detain any person suspected of treason without due process of law. He even dismissed the chief justice of Ghanaian Supreme Court, Sir Arku Korsah, when a three-judge panel Korsah headed acquitted suspects accused of plotting a coup. Nkrumah amended the constitution making his party, the Convention People's Party, the only legal party in the country. He capped his political career by having himself declared president-for-life.

Other African leaders followed in Nkrumah's footsteps. Julius Nyerere became the first president of Tanganyika (Tanzania) in 1962 and announced his brand of African socialism built around rural folks and their traditional values in a ujamaa (extended family) system. Millions of villagers were forced into collectivized agriculture. He modeled his constitution after Ghana's and



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followed Nkruma's script. Nyerere established a one-man, one-party state around his Tanganyika African National Union, outlawed strikes, nationalized private banks and industries, duplicated Nkruma's preventive detention act to go after his opponents and greatly increased his personal power.

With the exception of a few countries, Africa had been incurably infected by Nkrumah's one-man, one-party virus before the end of the 1960s. Most of the leaders of the newly independent African countries followed Nkrumah's political formula by declaring states of emergency, suspending their constitutions, conferring unlimited executive powers upon themselves, and enacting oppressive laws which enabled them to arrest, detain and persecute their rivals, dissenters, and others they considered threats at will.

The economic and political outcomes of the one-man, one-party dictatorships by the end of the 1960s were dismal. Nkrumah's program of rapid industrialization by reducing Ghana's dependence on foreign capital and imports had a devastating effect on its important cocoa export sector. Many of the socialist economic development projects he launched failed. By the time he was overthrown in a military coup in 1966, Ghana had fallen from one of the richest African countries to one of the poorest. Similarly, Tanzania nose-dived from the largest exporter of agricultural products in Africa to the largest importer of agricultural products. The one-man, one-party state also proved to be ineffective in reducing ethnic tensions and preventing conflict. Civil wars, genocides, low level ethnic conflicts and corruption spread throughout the continent like wildfire.

Waiting in the wings were Africa's soldiers. Accusing the civilian governments of corruption, incompetence and mismanagement of the economy and claiming a patriotic duty to rescue their countries from collapse, military officers knocked off these governments one by one. Gen. Joseph Mobutu seized power in the Congo (Zaire) following a protracted political struggle between Patrice Lumumba and Joseph Kasavubu. Col. Houari Boumedienne overthrew Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria. A group of army officers overthrew the monarchy in Brundi. In the Central African Republic, Col. Bokassa (later Emperor Jean Bedel Bokassa) overthrew David Dacko. Gen. Idi Amin overthrew Milton Obote in Uganda. Nigeria flipped two coups, one by Gen. Johnson Ironsi who was overthrown by Gen. Yakubu Gowon. Many other African countries suffered similar fates.

There is overwhelming evidence to show that the one-man, one-party state has been a total failure in Africa over the past one-half century. Under these dictatorships, African countries have faced civil and border wars and ethnic and religious strife. Famine, malnutrition and



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insufficient food production have caused the deaths of millions of Africans. The poverty and unemployment rates continue to rise despite billions in foreign aid and loans. Infant mortality is nearly 100 per thousand (compared to 5 in the United States). Africans have the lowest life expectancies in the world. After fifty years of independence per capita income in much of Africa had declined so much that President Obama had to artfully remind Africans in his speech in Ghana: “Countries like Kenya, which had a per capita economy larger than South Korea’s when I was born, have been badly outpaced.” Politically, the one-man, one-party dictatorships have brought neither ethnic harmony nor good governance; and they have failed to forge a common national identity for their people.

Today we still hear the same rubbish about a democracy before democracy recycled by a “new breed” of silver-tongued African leaders. Meles Zenawi, the chief architect of the one-man, one-party state in Ethiopia says:

Establishing democracy in Africa is bound to take a long time and that elections alone will not produce democracy and do not necessarily bring about democratic culture or guarantee a democratic exercise of rule. Creating a democracy in poverty-ridden and illiterate societies that have not yet fully embraced democratic values and are not yet familiar with democratic concepts, rules and procedures is bound to take a long time and to exact huge costs.

Similar arguments are made by Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Paul Kagame of Rwanda; and even the wily old coyote, Robert Mugabe, pulls the same stunt at age 85 to justify clinging to power.

The “new breed” dictators are trying to sell the same old snake oil in a new bottle to Africans. But no one is fooled by the sweet-talking, iron-fisted new breed dictators who try to put a kinder and gentler face on their dictatorship, brutality and corruption. They should spare us their empty promises and hypocritical moral pontifications. For one-half century, Africans have been told democracy requires sacrifices and pain; and they must look inwards to their village communities, traditional elders and consensus dialogue to find the answers. Africans don’t want to hear that “democracy” takes time and they must wait, and wait and wait as the new breed of dictators pick the continent clean right down to the bare bones. Africans want Africa to no longer be the world’s cesspool of corruption, criminality and cruelty.

The fact of the matter is that there is no such thing as democracy before democracy. There could be either democracy or one-man, one-party dictatorships in Africa. We all know exactly what the latter means. The only question is how best to implement constitutional multiparty systems in Africa. On this question, there may be an ironic twist of history. As Ghana was the



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original model of the one-man, one-party state in Africa, Ghana today could be the model of constitutional multiparty democracy in Africa.

As I have argued previously argued[1], Ghana today has a functioning competitive multiparty political system guided by its Constitution. Article 55 guarantees “Every citizen of Ghana of voting age has the right to join a political party.” Political parties are free to organize and “disseminate information on political ideas, social and economic programmes of a national character.” BUT TRIBAL AND ETHNIC PARTIES ARE ILLEGAL IN GHANA under Article 55 (4). That is the key to Ghana’s political success. The Ghanaians also have an independent Electoral Commission which ensures the integrity of the electoral process, and under Article 46 is an institution “not subject to the direction or control of any person or authority.” Ghanaians enjoy many a panoply of political civil, economic, social and cultural rights. In 2008, Ghana (population 23 million) ranked 31 out of 173 countries worldwide on World Press Freedom Index (Ethiopia- population 80 million ranked 142/173). There are more than 133 private newspapers, 110 FM radio stations and 2 state-owned dailies. Ghanaians express their opinions without fear of government retaliation. The rule of law is upheld and the government follows and respects the Constitution. Ghana has an independent judiciary which is vital to the observance of the rule of law and protection of civil liberties. Political leaders and public officials abide by the rulings and decisions of the courts and other fact-finding inquiry commissions. Ghana is certainly not a utopia, but it is proof positive that multiparty constitutional democracy can and will work in Africa.

Africa’s and Ethiopia’s future in the 21st Brave New Globalized Century lie in genuine multiparty democracy, not in recycled one-man, one-party, pie-in-the-sky-promising dictatorships. Poverty, ethnic conflict, illiteracy and all of the other social ills will continue to haunt Africa for decades to come. Dealing effectively with these issues can not be left to failed-beyond-a-shadow-of-doubt, one-man, one-party dictatorships. If Africa is to be saved from total collapse, its ordinary people must be fully empowered in an open, pluralistic and competitive multiparty political process. For those who have any doubts about Ethiopia’s readiness for genuine multiparty democracy, let them look at the facts of the 2005 election: 26 million eligible Ethiopians were registered to vote in that election out of a population of 74 million. A stunning 90 percent of the 26 million actually voted. NO MORE ONE-MAN, ONE-PARTY DICTATORSHIPS IN AFRICA. GENUINE MULTIPARTY DEMOCRACY, NOW!

[1] <http://www.ethiopianreview.com/content/10396>

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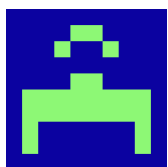
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