

Reflections on recent elections in Africa

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IOANNIS MANTZIKOS, MAR 8 2011

It seems that despite Africa's economic renaissance, many of its states drift towards a new model of authoritarianism: the so called "soft authoritarianism."

This not a new phenomenon. From 1964, Kwame Nkrumah invented the whole idea of president-for-life, and subsequently became the first certified post-independence African dictator. "Seek ye first the political Kingdom!" he said as the prophet of African independence and Ghana's first leader when it became independent in 1957. His advice has been followed diligently by every politically ambitious African man ever since. The few who got to the top of Africa's greasy political pole have seized it and held on tight, usually until pushed off by force. In 1970, H. Kamuzu Banda of Malawi declared himself 'President-for-Life'. Jean-Bédél Bokassa, the military ruler of the Central African Republic, kicked it up a notch in the mid-1970s. He coronated himself "Emperor" Idi Amin of Uganda, Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire, Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Ivory Coast, Muammar al-Gaddafi of Libya, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Albert Bongo of Gabon.

The Mugabe phenomenon is a fine example of a special type of African leaders once admired as national heroes turned "demons" as called by many of his compatriots. Robert Mugabe is the only ruler Zimbabweans have known since Independence in 1980. President Mugabe has ruled the country with an iron fist, using violence as part of his election campaign, from the first post-Independence elections in 1985 when opposition Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) supporters were beaten up and made to vote for his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front. Thousands of innocent civilians were killed in Matebeleland and Midlands in the five-year civil strife from 1982-87, which is now commonly known as *Gukurahundi*, meaning to wipe the country of 'dissidents'.

There was more widespread and systematic violence at the 2000 parliamentary elections, and again at the 2002 presidential elections after the formation of the Movement for Democratic Change, led by former trade unionist Morgan Tsvangirai. Surprisingly the crucial 2008 parliamentary and presidential elections were very peaceful until Mugabe lost, with 43 percent of the vote against Tsvangirai's 48 percent; ZANU-PF also lost its parliamentary majority (99 seats to 110 for the opposition). The run-up to the second round of elections was a bloody campaign, which left close to 200 people dead, forcing Tsvangirai to pull out of the race.

Initially regarded as a revolutionary who wanted to keep the party leadership youthful (and as a man who would not tolerate corruption when ZANU-PF introduced a leadership code in 1984), Mugabe slowly turned into a dictator. Die-hard opponents like Edgar Tekere, his former Secretary General, and later Eddison Zvobgo were got rid of. Mugabe has retained power by rewarding loyalists and making sure that there is no logical successor at any one time.

It has been widely accepted that African states, with a few exceptions, have no common understanding or experience of nationhood. Their flags, national anthems, and identities were created by outsiders. Patriotism, in the good sense of positive loyalty to one's country and fellow citizens, is in short supply. If you want power, you play the ethnic card or smear your religious rivals. When you achieve power, you bring your own people into government – and even more important, into the army. Thus, many of these African leaders who replaced the colonial masters have not hearkened back to pre-colonial Africa and used traditional values and methods to hold the center and keep things from falling apart.

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In 2010, in Ethiopia the victory of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front and its allies, who claimed 545 out of 547 seats in Parliament following a massive campaign of intimidation against opposition supporters. Many of the protesters were paid the equivalent of a day's wage for a few hours of shouting against Human Rights Watch.

In Rwanda, President Paul Kagame is admired by the West for leading the country to an economic renaissance after the nation was traumatized by the 1990s genocide. However, in the August elections, Kagame set to duplicate his implausibly high 95 percent victory in the last vote and was pressing charges against an opposition leader for "divisionism," namely downplaying the genocide.

In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni, who denounced dictatorship in Africa when he took power in 1986 and was seen as another great democratic hope, has said he'll try to extend his 24-year tenure and finally succeeded in doing so.

In Gabon and Togo, the deaths of long-serving autocrats Omar Bongo and Gnassingbé Eyadéma had meant elections in which power was smoothly transferred—to their sons.

Thus, backsliders have outnumbered the well-doers, a shift that hasn't gone unnoticed in the West. Political freedoms declined in 10 countries on the continent in 2009, while they improved in just four, according to Freedom House[1].

Undoubtedly, since multi-party democracy swept across the world after the end of the cold war, only few sitting African presidents have run for re-election, lost and retired gracefully. Thus, what seems to lay at the heart of Africa's problems is not democracy in the Western or any kind of sense, but the failure of leadership and especially Africa's winner-takes-all politics, which explains everything that has gone wrong with the continent. It has become a pattern: a sitting president reluctantly holds an election; deludes himself into thinking he will win; no one would dare tell him he might lose.

But many times African "leaders", when they lose power, blame the West for the continent's underdevelopment, poverty, backwardness and mismanagement. They are trying to persuade their followers that everything is being caused by evil powers outside the continent. The latest re-invention of African leaders is "globalization" and "neoliberalism". According to the U.N., life expectancy in Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Mozambique and Swaziland for the period 2005-2010 is less than 44 years, the worst in the world. The average annual income in Zimbabwe at independence in 1980 was USD \$950. In 2009, 100 trillion Zimbabwean dollars (with a "T") was worth about USD \$300. In the same year, a loaf of bread in Zimbabwe cost 300 billion Zimbabwean dollars (with a "B")[2]. It is not without explanation why Africa is the only continent to have grown poorer over the last three decades while other developing countries and regions have grown.

But, even the outside world is not without any responsibilities for Africa's current misfortunes. It's partly thanks to the rise of China, which provides cheap loans and investment to resource-rich countries while asking no hard questions about human rights, thus strengthening the hold of authoritarian governments. The West also shares responsibility. The Obama administration and its European allies have turned a blind eye to autocratic trends in places like Uganda, Burundi, and Ethiopia because of those countries' role in battling Islamists. Moreover, Uganda illustrates the terrible dilemma facing those who wish to help Africans improve their lives. To punish Museveni by cutting aid could mean hurting millions of Ugandans who are beginning at last to see real change. The country is so dependent on aid that dropping it would risk destroying the economic gains it has made in recent years. Museveni knows the donors, and their moral scruples, well. He will take huge risks with his country's future to stay in power. Will he, after all he has achieved, throw it all away? As they used to say of Moi in Kenya: "If you are the only one on the teat, it does not matter how thin the cow gets."

Zimbabwe, Kenya, Cote d'Ivoire, Rwanda, Sudan, etc. all point to one simple truth: winner-takes-all multiparty democracy is not appropriate for Africa's nation-states. Much of Africa today is under the control of "Vampire states". As the noted African economist George Ayittey explains, the "vampire African states" are "governments which have

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been hijacked by a phalanx of bandits and crooks who would use the instruments of the state machinery to enrich themselves and to strengthen their patron client networks[3].”

Thus, we should not underestimate the profound changes which took place at the end of the 20th century in Africa. Two reasons reflect this: the fact that China had targeted Africa as the supplier of much-needed raw materials. Suddenly Chinese companies, state-owned and private, were going where Western companies feared to tread. That pushed the value of Africa’s raw materials and also gave African governments an alternative to Western partners. It gave them revenue and economic and political bargaining space.

Second and most importantly a new professional class began to emerge. Many of them had been educated or worked outside Africa. Inspired by a vision of Africa’s potential, they returned determined to do business according to international standards. Directly or indirectly they contribute to political stability as well and, most significantly, they are confidently both African and European. They have bridged the dichotomy their parents’ generation found so difficult between being African and Western. The rapidly emerging African middle class could number as many as 300 million, out of a total population of 1 billion, according to development expert Vijay Majahan, author of the 2009 book *Africa Rising*. While few of them have the kind of disposable income found in Asia and the West, these accountants, teachers, maids, taxi drivers, even roadside street vendors, are driving up demand for goods and services like cell phones, bank accounts, up-market foodstuffs, and real estate. In fact, in Africa’s 10 largest economies, the service sector makes up 40 percent of GDP, not too far from India’s 53 percent[4].

Indeed, many experts believe Africa, with its expansive base of newly minted consumers, may very well be on the verge of becoming the next India, thanks to frenetic urbanization and the sort of big push in services and infrastructure that transformed the Asian subcontinent 15 years ago. Just as India once harnessed its booming population of cheap labor, Africa stands to gain by the rapid growth of its big cities. Already the continent boasts the world’s highest rate of urbanization, which jump-starts growth through industrialization and economies of scale.

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[1] Freedom House: Arch Puntington, Freedom in the World 2010: Erosion of Freedom Intensifies <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=130&year=2010>

[2] Worldwide Trends in the Human Development Index 1970-2010 <http://hdr.undp.org/en/data/trends/>

[3] <http://www.panafricanvisions.com/old/8/interviews.htm>

[4] <http://www.newsweek.com/2010/02/18/how-africa-is-becoming-the-new-absia.html>