



Reclaiming Democracy for Africa: Alarming Signs of Post-Democratic Governance

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Introduction

In an article that I published in 1996 on democracy and multi-party politics in Africa, I argued as follows: ‘Efforts by external governments, institutions, and agencies to direct political and economic changes must not deny the peoples of Africa and their representatives the right to determine their own future. It has been argued that global interdependence has profoundly affected the process of governance, and especially the concepts of consent and legitimacy. They have broadened the constituency of Western policymakers, which has become the entire world, and have altered both the meaning of accountability and the scope of political participation.’¹ This paper extends my earlier argument by addressing the interrelated issues of consent, popular participation, and accountability as they apply to African states that consider themselves, and are considered by outsiders, as democratic. The paper is largely prescriptive.

The meanings of consent, popular participation and accountability are historically contingent and may, therefore, vary from one period to another, and from one geographical location to another. However, for purposes of this paper, *consent* simply refers to the uncoerced agreement of the electors on the procedures governing the distribution of political power and decision-making within their society. This does not imply unanimity on specific issues.² *Popular participation*, as used in this paper, refers to conditions in which the majority of the people have relatively equal opportunities to express their views about the policies and decisions that govern them. *Accountability* in this context means the existence of conditions in which those who exercise power have to justify their actions before the electors. It entails continuing efforts to seek the approval of the ruled.

Some African states, which consider themselves democratic, appear to fall short of meeting the requirements for consent, popular participation and accountability. I will posit that a situation in which the elected political leaders are kept honest by, and made accountable to, external authorities rather than by their own people, is not a democracy, but a post-democracy. Post-democracies effectively disenfranchise the electors while maintaining a veneer of democratic governance. The ethical position I have adopted in this paper is that the ultimate moral referent of any public policy, including efforts to achieve consent, popular participation and accountability, should be the welfare and security of individual human beings and their communities.

This paper is based on four hypotheses. The first is that in African countries, perhaps more so than in the developed states, democracy requires strategic leadership in order to survive or consolidate its base. It is such leadership that establishes appropriate conditions for consent, popular participation and accountability. The second hypothesis is that democracy is possible only if the structures, processes and institutions through which the people are expected to express their decisions are accommodating to their interests, values, aspirations and hopes. In other words, the people need to identify with, and feel they own, their public institutions. The third hypothesis is that democracy exists only if the ruled, rather than outside agencies and authorities,



have the primary responsibility of holding their leaders and governments accountable between the elections. This does not preclude the possibility that the ruled, through civil society organizations or other means, may call on outsiders for assistance. The fourth hypothesis is that the African peoples may reclaim their democracy mainly, but not exclusively, through programmes that effectively address poverty alleviation, gender inequality, socio-economic injustices, and capacity building.³ The next section of this paper will address the issue of strategic leadership. The rest of the paper will substantiate the remaining three hypotheses in the order in which they have been presented above.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP

Hypothesis 1: In African countries, democracy requires strategic leadership in order to survive or consolidate its base.

It is generally acknowledged that leadership entails a vision, inspiration, goals and strategies. Strategic leadership is crucial for the establishment and consolidation of democracy in Africa. Such leadership is also vital for the attainment of sustainable development, the national interest and security. Strategic leadership has to be conceived and exercised within a system of shared values, rules, norms and principles, not in a moral vacuum. In particular, state and government leadership has to be underpinned by the ethical principles that I mentioned earlier: human welfare, democratic governance and socio-economic justice.

The term leadership conjures up the image of an exemplary figure; of someone who can help others set goals and achieve them. It also implies the capacity to control, shape or direct an entity, an activity or a process. This capacity requires creative and imaginative thinking, innovation and entrepreneurship. Leadership has to be defined in terms of driving or motivating an organization, a state, a government or any group to achieve something. It is ability, willingness and a commitment to mobilise and utilise the best resources, operational skills and techniques available to attain a given goal or resolve a problem. In other words, good leaders must demonstrate a commitment to seek the best means or make the necessary sacrifices to pursue the goals that they have set or provide a solution to an existing problem. They should also be able to motivate or inspire their constituents to pursue their goals with confidence.

Leadership is diversified and dispersed in society. For example, in African states there are leaders of government, the business community, trade unions, farming community, universities and other centres of learning, and the professions. Therefore, when the term leadership is used, it applies to political as well as non-political leaders. There is often a tendency to associate leadership with status or high offices, such as those of prime minister and president of a country. This may be correct in relation to certain individuals, but it may also be incorrect in relation to certain other individuals who may occupy high office. It is possible to have a prime minister or president of a country who has no leadership qualities. It is also possible to have a vice-chancellor of a university or a principal of a school who is not a leader in the true sense of the word. Likewise, in a government there may be permanent secretaries or departmental heads who do not, and perhaps cannot, exercise leadership or take leaderlike initiatives. At the same time, there may be middle or lower level officials who have vision and can inspire others to achieve their purposes. Thus, while it is generally expected



that those who occupy high office, such as prime minister or president, should provide leadership, it is not always correct to associate leadership with status and rank. Even those who do not hold formal positions of power can provide leadership. For example, Mahatma Gandhi provided leadership when he did not hold a formal position of power. In South Africa, Nelson Mandela provided leadership while still in prison, and at a time when he did not occupy a formal position in the African National Council.

Many African states cry out for strategic leadership, that is, leadership with a clear vision and the capacity to mobilise human, financial, scientific and social resources – at the sub-national, national and regional levels - to meet the national interests. The entire continent needs leadership that can help states, governments and civil societies to work out the most appropriate ways of utilising national resources to meet the goals of democratic governance, sustainable development and security. Democracy is unlikely to succeed without sustainable development.

African states also need strategic leadership that can point in the direction of mega-policies that integrate democratic governance, science and technology, sustainable development, environmental management and international cooperation. Subject to the fact that there are possibilities and limitations of leadership, strategic leadership should help to identify the natural resources on which policies should focus, secure markets for national resources and initiate productive linkages between internal agents, regional actors and the global community. This leadership should help to develop dynamic state agencies and map out autonomy for such agencies, while creating room for civil society and other non-state actors within. Such leadership is not in evidence in much of Africa, but there is nothing to preclude its emerging in the future. After all, contrary to the old-fashioned perception that leaders are born rather than made, I believe that leaders of all kinds are made. The idea that leaders are made raises the question: Who makes them? The society makes leaders, and the task of policy makers is to provide conditions that are conducive to the social construction of leaders.

Recommendation

- African policy makers should give top priority to the training, development and nurturing of leaders at all levels of society.
- Where possible, policy makers should seek to identify young people who have the potential to be effective leaders and give them the opportunities to develop their leadership skills.
- Policy makers should embark on appropriate capacity building programmes.

It is through such measures that African states can establish conditions for the reclamation of democracy.

PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURES

Hypothesis 2: Democracy is possible only if the structures, processes and institutions through which the people are expected to express their decisions are accommodating to their interests,



values, aspirations and hopes.

Public institutions, structures and processes that reflect the values, interests and hopes of the African peoples are crucial for the reclamation of democracy. The type of structures and institutions required may vary from one country to another, and from one region to another. Even within the same country or region, they will evolve in response to changing times. However, in the present global environment, these institutions and structures have to address effectively human rights, gender relations, environmental issues, and participatory democracy, among other things. Indeed, such institutional frameworks need to take account of both global forces and indigenous contributions. Therefore, it is imperative that African policy makers establish political-legal frameworks for the consolidation of democracy that reflect the changes in global norms while at the same serving the local and national interests. It is also important that the citizens of African states feel they own these institutions.

Public institutions and processes that are geared toward consolidating democratic governance ought to cover other issues that relate to development and the realization of human welfare and security. Such structures may deal with water management, agro-biodiversity and other scientific endeavours. Many African states lack the basic policy infrastructures to integrate science and technology into development objectives. It is imperative that African policy makers consider seriously the design of legal, social and political institutions and policies that allow for the absorption of new technologies, and the integration of sustainable development, environmental management and resource exploitation. It is through such structures and processes that meaningful democratic governance can take root.

The political-legal frameworks may relate to a regionally shared resource or the tapping of indigenous knowledge for development. A good example of a regional legal-political framework designed to deal with resource use, development and environmental management is the Tripartite Agreement between Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania, which was signed in 1994. The three countries have also been members of the FAO Committee for Inland Fisheries of Africa (CIFA) since the 1970s. The 1994 agreement set up tasks for a Lake Victoria Environmental Management Programme (LVEMP) and agreed that the cooperative framework should focus on two components: fisheries management and water hyacinth control, on the one hand, and management of water quality and land use, on the other. Such projects may appear technical and scientific, but they have also serious political, economic and social consequences.

Constructing African structures, institutions and policies in this era of globalisation involves indigenous as well as external inputs. African countries are part of the international society, so their political and legal institutions and policies are partly derived from the rules, institutions, values and norms that bind other countries. Therefore, constructing political-legal frameworks in Africa must take account of the existing and changing global norms. They must, in particular, take into account the revolution in biotechnology and biomedical research, international knowledge flows, and agricultural innovations. This is important in two senses. First, it helps to prepare African countries to take advantage of the latest technology to improve their crops, farm in semi-arid areas, and exploit their biodiversity resources. In the second sense, implementing policies that are in conformity with global norms helps to



improve the international legitimacy of African governments and their leaders.

However, foreign institutions cannot be transplanted root, stem and branch into African societies without taking account of African values, norms, standards and practices. It is important to stress the indigenous factor, because structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), which were promoted by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank from the 1980s, did not take into account the positive aspects of the existing practices. As a result, SAPs were partly responsible for eroding the accumulated technological capacity in several sectors. The new legal and political structures need to reflect as much as possible the progressive values, norms and standards in Africa.

Given the fact that African policy makers sometimes have to maneuver between the interests of the local civil society, on the one side, and the forces of globalisation, on the other, their challenge is to establish new institutional frameworks that are responsive to both sides. This requires vision, institutional creativity and a willingness to make crucial compromises. It simply means that African policy makers need to show a readiness to promote and experiment with policies and laws that incorporate social learning. Social learning does not always mean borrowing from other countries. It may simply require a greater understanding of the evolving social, cultural, economic, legal and scientific contexts within which African governments operate.

It has been argued that ‘institutions – whether women’s groups, clans, religions, research [centres] or universities – are the framework within which social and economic transitions are organised, conducted and coordinated’.⁴ To move in this direction, African policy makers need to construct and reconstruct political and legal infrastructures that allow for community participation in resource and environmental management. As already indicated, such infrastructures require a strategic leadership and new institutional capacities.

In constructing new institutional capacities to guide Africa through the turbulent waves of the coming decades, policy makers will understandably look to the West for policy prescriptions. There is no doubt that African states will need to continue borrowing ideas from the developed world as well as from other developing countries. However, the indigenous African people, like indigenous people in other parts of the world, have knowledge about medicine, environmental management and agriculture, among other things, which may be of use in the new millennium. African policy makers need to explore possibilities of utilising Africa’s traditional knowledge and expertise, especially on biodiversity.

Recommendation

- The top priority of African policy makers is to redesign political-legal structures and institutions that facilitate the consolidation of democratic governance at various levels of society.
- They should establish new political-legal frameworks that embody the principles of inclusion, freedom and popular participation.
- They should create institutions and structures that are geared towards the absorption of appropriate technologies for the conversion of natural resources into national wealth.



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- They should build political legal frameworks that provide room for the input of indigenous knowledge.
 - They should create political-legal structures that reflect the changing global norms, and that are dynamic.
 - Where necessary, they should be creative in establishing dynamic public structures, institutions and processes that encourage local participation in decision-making.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND POPULAR PARTICIPATION

Hypothesis 3: Democracy exists only if the ruled, rather than outside agencies and authorities, have the primary responsibility of holding their leaders and governments accountable between the elections.

Accountability and popular participation in Africa are threatened by many factors, which include: corruption, identity issues and external forces. Corruption is rampant in much of Africa, and in the majority of cases it is condoned or practised by those in power. Even multinational corporations, religious groups and civil society organizations engage in corruption in one form or another. This situation is exacerbated by the tendency of ruling parties to exclude opposition parties from the use of government resources, including the publicly owned media. Without putting an end to corruption, it will be impossible to reclaim democracy. The leaders and ruling parties have to accept to share public resources with the opposition, and the opposition, in turn, needs to understand fully its role of ensuring that the government is accountable.

Identity issues include allegiances that most African peoples have to their clans, ethnic groups, race, ideology, gender or class. It is this allegiance to narrow interests that buttresses corruption and undermines efforts to consolidate democracy. Addressing this problem requires political leadership that looks beyond the aforementioned narrow allegiances. It also calls for public structures and institutions that place a premium on national, as opposed to sectional, interests.

Another important threat to democratic governance emanates from outside pressure. It is ironic that external authorities, including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, interfere in the governance of African states with a view to rooting out corruption and encouraging what they call 'good governance'. These organizations have good motives, but quite often their prescriptions do not take into account the values, hopes and aspirations of the people. Some of the steps, which African governments are required to take, such as cost-sharing measures in schools and hospitals, end up hurting the African people rather than relieving them of their social and economic pain. Moreover, by imposing strict conditions on African governments, the multilateral organizations compel these governments to act as if they are accountable to the multilateral institutions rather than to their own electors.

I am primarily concerned with the fact that in much of Africa, consent, accountability and popular participation are applied differently from the way they are applied in the developed world. Some of the main characteristics of a democratic system are free competition among political parties, periodic elections, a government that is accountable to the voters, and respect for



the fundamental freedoms of thought, expression and assembly. These features exist in some African states, especially those in which multiparty systems have been established, but many African governments act as if they are accountable to external authorities, rather than to their people.

Several 'liberalised' African states operate in a system that can be described as post-democracy. In a post-democracy, the citizens may theoretically possess civil and political rights, but in reality they lack the power and influence that ordinary people exercise in a developed country. This situation can be reversed only if the African people reclaim their democracy. Reclaiming democracy requires that political leaders appreciate the significance of consent, accountability and popular participation. The African people can reclaim democracy only when it is they, rather than external authorities, that hold their governments accountable.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Hypothesis 4: The African peoples may reclaim their democracy mainly, but not exclusively, through programmes that effectively address poverty alleviation, gender inequality, socio-economic injustices, and capacity building.

Africa's opportunities to reclaim democracy require a capacity to engage in knowledge-intensive processes. They call for expertise drawn from a wide range of disciplines, such as law, sociology, policy studies, science and technology. They also require the capacity to draw connections among mega-policy issues such as democratic governance, sustainable development, environmental management and international cooperation. While expertise in all these fields can be acquired through high level training and social learning, what Africa needs most is the training that prepares the personnel to understand and appreciate the connections among these disparate disciplines and fields of activity. As Africa seeks to balance its enormous and potentially conflicting social, economic and environmental needs, it has little choice but to build the capacity for environmental planning, resource management and sustainable development, using participatory approaches at the sub-national and national levels.

The term capacity building is often used to refer to a wide range of activities related to learning and the acquisition and use of knowledge. For example, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has defined capacity building as 'the strengthening and/or development of human resources and institutional capacities. It involves the transfer of know-how, the development of appropriate facilities, and training in sciences related to safety in biotechnology and in the use of risk-assessment and risk-management'.⁵ In other cases, capacity building has been used to describe the training of highly skilled professionals such as lawyers, accountants, computer programmers, doctors, specialists in science and technology, and other professionals.

As a process of learning, acquiring and applying knowledge, capacity building legitimises imitation. By this, I mean that through capacity building, individuals are encouraged to adopt the skills, techniques and methods of those whom they perceive as 'successful' and apply them to address problems in their countries. In this paper, I use the term in a limited sense to



refer to the building of human resources and societal institutions that are necessary to perform specific tasks, namely the consolidation of democracy through popular participation. It is used, in part, to describe the creation of conditions and organisational structures that are conducive for policy planning and implementation in Africa. It also refers to the short-term and long-term training of expertise that can integrate democratic governance, science and technology policy, sustainable development, environmental management and international cooperation.

Developing institutional capacity remains a high priority. In addition, there is a great need for developing the capacity for strategic environmental assessment that encompasses sectoral and regional approaches. Unfortunately, across the continent at this stage of Africa's development, there are still very few appropriate organisational structures and outfits for capacity building. Yet, the training of highly skilled professionals is extremely vital if Africa is to reclaim democracy. As Calestous Juma has pointed out, institutional leadership and institutional capacity building are crucial for development and for the application of appropriate science and technology.⁶

Successful states like Japan, Singapore, South Korea and Taiwan care more about capacity building than do African countries. They have invested adequately in capacity building, and have been more adept at imitating, and sometimes exceeding, the practices of developed countries. If Africa does not invest sufficiently in education, it cannot be expected to do well in capacity building. Africa has universities and other training institutes, but they have been mismanaged, starved of research funds and neglected to the extent that they offer few answers to Africa's needs for capacity building. At the 10th general conference of the Association of African Universities in Nairobi in February 2001, it was pointed out that most African universities were 'reeling under mismanagement, political interference and a shortage of funds'.⁷

What alternatives does Africa have? The African Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS), based in Nairobi, has made a visible contribution to capacity building. Its books on different areas of science and technology, including biotechnology, have been of great use to policy makers and academics alike. Moreover, in collaboration with the World Resources Institute, ACTS has established a regional training course for African policy makers on the Convention on Biological Diversity. The course covers several areas, including the formulation of national access and benefit sharing legislation. This is a very important aspect of capacity building, but it cannot be a substitute for formal training.

It has been argued that the UN University Institute for Natural Resources in Africa (UNU/INRA) could provide the required institutional leadership 'to build African capacity in the application of science and technology, particularly in the management of Africa's biological resources and biopolicy'.⁸ The UNU/INRA has the clout to assume such a leadership role. Indeed, the UNU/INRA has established an innovative networking system that serves a useful capacity building function. The UNU/INRA College of Research Associates (CRA) provides research, education and training opportunities for African scientists and scholars in different areas of science and technology. CRA members are drawn from various



universities in Africa, and while participating in the UNU/INRA programmes, they still remain in their home institutions. Members are usually encouraged to prepare research proposals, which are peer-reviewed. Successful projects become part of the scheduled activities of UNU/INRA after adoption by the Advisory Board of the UNU/INRA. However, the UNU/INRA's efforts at capacity building would still leave a void because it, like its parent University in Tokyo, does not have the mandate to offer degrees or accredited certificates.

What this means is that in the long-term, African states have to look for alternative ways of capacity building. The richer African states might find it possible to train their own personnel in most disciplines, with minimal outside assistance. The poorer states face daunting tasks. They might find it necessary to give their universities strategic leaders, but unless these universities are restructured and funded appropriately, they cannot provide the needed training. Indeed, poorer African states will find it advantageous to join forces to build their human capacities.

The choice of what disciplines to emphasize in capacity building is of particular importance. It has been suggested that part of the personnel African states need to build their capacities should train in economic theories 'that seek to place issues such as innovation, human development and knowledge at the centre of the growth process'.⁹ I support this view and add that capacity building in all African states would also need to consider imparting knowledge that draws the connections between democratic governance, resource use, sustainable development, environmental management and international cooperation.

However, such emphases should not remain constant. They should change as societies evolve and as the global community changes. In general terms, an education or training that links the national interest, environmental management, sustainable development and security would be ideal, although what constitutes each of these issues is subject to reinterpretation at different times. Failure to emphasise these links would produce 'experts' who are liable to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The idea that there are no formal degree programmes in African universities that offer courses that link these mega-policy issues is a matter of regret. Some of the required skills can be acquired through training seminars, workshops, issue networks and strategic partnerships involving personnel from various departments and ministries. Through such *ad hoc* arrangements, African scholars and policy makers may be sufficiently exposed to theories and policy prescriptions that seek to integrate democratic governance, resource use, environmental management, sustainable development and international cooperation. However, this is only the second best option. The first option is to restructure African universities and other educational institutes and equip them to handle these integrated programmes.

Recommendations

- The first priority for African policy makers should be to revamp the universities and other centres of higher education with a view to training personnel that is able to facilitate effectively the reclamation of democracy. These universities and centres of learning should liaise with the UNU/INRA to identify areas of science and technology



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- that they can pursue in the future.
- African policy makers should explore opportunities of establishing regional institutes, on the scale of ACTS, to help develop the capacity they need to enhance their democratic structures. Such institutes are likely to receive funding from the donor community, provided they are competently managed.
 - African policy makers and educational leaders need to broaden and deepen research partnerships with industry, as well as with developed and other developing countries. Through such partnerships, they may acquire part of the knowledge and funding they need to help their societies reclaim democracy.
 - The political elite should avoid interfering in the management of universities.

These initiatives require the strategic leadership mentioned earlier. They also require people who are able to integrate democratic governance, sustainable development, environmental management, and international cooperation. Moreover, these initiatives need innovation in government, and especially in political-legal structures. It is these measures that will pave the highway for the reclamation of democracy in Africa.¹⁰

Notes

¹ Samuel M. Makinda, 'Democracy and Multiparty Politics in Africa', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4, December 1996, p. 573.

² For a brief but interesting discussion of the concept of consent, see James L. Hyland, *Democratic Theory: The Philosophical Foundations* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995), pp. 72-73.

³ These hypotheses are adapted from Samuel M. Makinda, *From Natural Resources to National Wealth: Ethical, National Interest and Policy Issues for Africa in the New Millennium*, UNU/INRA Annual Lectures on Natural Resources Conservation and Management in Africa (Accra and Tokyo: UNU/INRA 2001), pp. 78-92.

⁴ John Mugabe, 'Introduction' in J. Mugabe and N. Clark (eds.), *Managing Biodiversity: National Systems of Conservation and Innovation in Africa* (Nairobi, African Centre for Technology Studies, 1998), p. 2.

⁵ See I. Virgin, R. J. Frederick and S. Ramachandran, 'Biosafety Training Programmes and Their Importance in Capacity Building and Technology Assessment', in S. Shantharam and J. F. Montgomery (eds.), *Biotechnology, Biosafety and Biodiversity: Scientific and Ethical Issues for Sustainable Development* (Enfield, NH: Science Publishers, 1999), p. 6.

⁶ Calestous Juma, *Science, Technology and Economic Growth: Africa's Biopolicy Agenda in the 21st Century*: UNU/INRA Annual Lectures on National Resource Conservation & Management in Africa. (Accra, Ghana, UNU/INRA 2000), p. 54.

⁷ Kariuki Waihenya and Samuel Siringi, *Nation*, 11 Feb 2001.

⁸ Juma 2000, p. 55.

⁹ Juma 2000, p. 54

¹⁰ For varied perspectives on democracy in Africa, see, for example, Marina Ottaway (ed.), *Democracy in Africa: The Hard Road Ahead* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1997).