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DEMOCRATIZATION IN AFRICA :
SOME EXPLORATORY VIEWS

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Introduction

The retreat of authoritarianism, dramatized by the still unfolding revolutions in Eastern Europe, has injected a new poignancy and meaning to the African debate on democratization. To many Africans, the demise of the 'vanguard party' of Leninist ideology and practice has called into question the legitimacy and viability of the 'one-party state' in Africa. Pluralism has become a catchword and the meaning of the term has shifted in emphasis from the salience of ethnicity to the realm of political democracy.

The democratization drive in Africa is a concern that dates back to, and is implicit in, the nationalist struggle for independence. But the inherited parliamentary models failed to live up to the democratic ideals. The failure was due partly to the colonial legacy and partly to the unresolved contradictions between the imperatives of democracy and the exigencies of development. "What emerged from the debris of the parliamentary model were varied forms of personal rule that achieved degrees of successes with varied degrees of coercion. Where there was success, however, it was precarious, temporary and crippled by its class and ethnic limitations; where there was failure, it was egregious, massive and tragic."⁽¹⁾

The democratization process in Africa, therefore, can be seen as yet another attempt to fulfill the promises of independence. The challenges

are no less demanding today than they were more than 50 years ago; the consequences of failure may even be greater.

I

Some Definitional Problems

The word 'democratization' immediately brings to mind the question : what kind of democracy? The almost universal claim to democracy has given the term as many meanings as usages. The uses of the concept range from the descriptive-prescriptive (parliamentary democracy) to the mutually-exclusive (2) (totalitarian democracy).

In this context, the term is used in its liberal-pluralist sense, defined in terms of civil rights, equitable allocation of power, and public accountability.

This shifts the problem of definition to the concept of pluralism itself. The term is often closely associated with the values, traditions, and practices of liberal democracy (Almond's Anglo-American type). In its most general sense, pluralism denotes the openness and diversity of society. Group theorists explain pluralism in terms of the interactions between a multiplicity of groups, with differing legitimate interests, (3) making claims on the decision-making process. The central assumptions of pluralism emphasize the plurality of values and interests of participants in policy-making, and the plurality of actors involved. In a pluralistic society, power is widely distributed among groups and is used to influence the institutions of government :

A general consensus prevails on fundamental principles of the 'rules of the game' or what outer limits of conflict are acceptable ...

Thus the multipower-centered society persists partly because of the exertion of the countervailing powers by many groups in conflict. Through the achievement of a temporary balance of power, equilibrium is established and social stability is achieved.(4)

As such, pluralism can be seen as having wider relevance and significance to the African situation where the issues of equality and power distribution have not been resolved.

Yet this approach assumes the prevalence of a degree of social homogeneity and political consensus that may not be obtainable even in most Western societies. This can mean that in plural societies not characterized by homogeneity and consensus the prerequisites for democratic government are not present. In this sense, pluralism can be said to be incompatible with democratization because it refers specifically to "segmental cleavages" in society. Indeed, pluralism is sometimes defined as automatically imposing the structural necessity for domination by one segment in society in order to effect "nondemocratic regulation of group relations."⁽⁵⁾
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These two aspects of pluralism in fact underline one central problem of democratization, namely : how can liberal-democratic pluralism be achieved without exacerbating the tensions inherent in ethnic-cultural pluralism? The issue is directly related to the wider context of political development theory. Arend Lijphart notes three significant aspects of the notion of political development: "In the first place, democratization and other dimensions of development are usually thought to be dependent on national integration ... Second, the prescription for policy-making which follows from this proposition is that nation-building must be accorded priority and must be the first task of the leaders of the developing states. Third, the usual view is that nation-building entails the eradication of primordial subnational attachments and their replacement

(7)
with national loyalty." Leonard Binder argues that "national integration requires the creation of a cultural-ideological consensus of a degree of comprehensiveness that has not yet been seen in these [developing] countries."⁽⁸⁾

It can be argued that the two dimensions of democratization and national integration need not be seen as making mutually exclusive claims, nor that the achievement of the latter is a prerequisite for success in the former. As Lijphart points out, several plural societies in Europe have achieved stable democracy not through social homogeneity but by "consociational" methods which he defines in terms of "both the segmental cleavages typical of a plural society and the political cooperation of the segmental elites."⁽⁹⁾

The relevance of these aspects of pluralism to the African situation raises a number of questions concerning the prospects of achieving or sustaining democratization. How can politics within the African context be seen as involving adjustment of conflicting claims or, more to the point, as resolving the basic questions raised by Lasswell of who gets what, when, and how? Can the state be made a largely neutral arena of group conflict providing access to policy making? Or does the democratic process itself inherently make such access selectively controlled? More fundamentally, how can the contradictions in the different strands of liberal-democratic pluralism and ethnic-cultural pluralism be resolved?

II

The African Debate

In the current African debate on democratization, (which has been going on since the mid-1980s in academic institutions, conferences,

publications and the mass media) some interesting hypotheses have emerged providing useful insights into African perceptions of democratization.

P. Anyang Nyong'o argues that "after thirty years of independence, there is no convincing correlation between dictatorship or authoritarian regimes and higher levels of economic growth or development in Africa." He sees the case for democracy as being based on two "anti-state" assumptions. Firstly, democracy provides for the organization of the people into competitive groups that would "tame" state power by competing for it in a multi-party pluralist system. Second, democracy would confine the role of the state to a "coordinator of society", leaving development issues to non-state actors.
(10)

T. Mkandawire questions the implied assumption that there is a correlation between development and democracy, arguing that even if such a relationship exists it need not necessarily suggest causation. He criticizes the notion of relationship as being an instrumentalist view of democracy in the sense that democracy is seen as "an efficacious political means to development." Mkandawire makes the point that the question of democracy should be raised in its own right and the case for it made on its own merits.
(11)

Samir Amin cautions against the notion of "anti-statism". He argues that the essential lesson of the failure of the 'development' of Africa is "the impossibility of achieving anything significant economically in the absence of a popular national state, that is one that is both strong (to resist the negative pressures coming from the world system and their internal ramifications) and democratic."
(12)

Amin views democracy as "an unavoidable condition" which is necessary to ensure the efficiency of a socialist social order, not a capitalist one.

Kivutha Kibwana maintains that, "one of the lessons to be learned from the socialist experience is that one-party rule cannot simply be maintained through state violence; indeed, for any system of government to be viable, it must continuously convince its citizens of its moral right to govern." He argues that the attainment of full-fledged Western-style democracy in Africa is a long-term prospect and would require unrestrained economic development so that a national bourgeoisie could develop to create competing segments capable, in turn, of creating diverse and competing parties. Kibwana envisages a transitional stage in democratic transformation which he calls 'minimal' or 'threshold' democracy, or even one-party pluralism. (13) These propositions imply a causal correlation between development and democracy in which democracy is the prerequisite.

Issa G. Shivji maintains that the right of the people to free organization, which the bureaucratic one-party state in Africa has tended to deny, is the most decisive issue in political democracy. But he sees free organization not in terms of the formation of class parties and non-government organizations in a multiparty system, but in terms of the formation of what he calls "people's organizations". These are defined as "voluntary associations of workers and farmers at the grass-roots level who defend their immediate interests and derive their democratic practices from direct experience." Shivji provides no institutional context within which these "democratic practices" could realistically be implemented in practice. (14)

Aikael Kweka raises the question of whether democratic reforms today are "a historical necessity for Africa or more of a political dictate being imposed by Western donor countries." He maintains that the Tanzanian model of a socialistically oriented one-party system has accumulated good

experience with inner-party democracy but has failed to generate a synthesis between individual freedom and responsible life in the community because of the impact of the market oriented economic reforms imposed by the IMF. Kweka, however, concludes that a multiparty system has become an "internal necessity" because it is interpreted as a response to growing social stratification. But he cautions that the multiparty state can only flourish if it disengages itself from dependency on the international economic system.
(15)

The reason why this should be the case is suggested by Nyanagabayaki Bazaara in a separate but related thesis. He views the multiparty system as "the latest added condition for receiving loans" and an attempt to buffer economic structural adjustments politically by means that are inappropriate since extraneous to the African context. A multiparty system could, at best, liberate the middle classes but would not necessarily alleviate the poverty of the masses. As such, structural adjustments would be implemented under repressive political conditions, thus eroding further the social basis for political democracy.
(16)

These views represent some of the salient aspects of the ongoing African debate on democratization. The debate, so far, raises some crucial issues and advances some useful hypotheses even though some basic questions concerning the dynamics of transformation of democratization still remain largely unexplored. What does the democratization process so far suggest about the type, motivation, and claims of the social forces that are challenging the old order? Why are there variations in the processes of transition to democracy? How can state responses to date inform us about the content and direction of the democratization process in the future?

The continual unfolding of the democratic process in Africa will certainly inject new insights into these and other areas of the ongoing

African debate. Equally, the fact that the debate is taking place at all, reflects a spirit of democratic optimism that is bound to enhance the cause and the likelihood of democratic transformation.

III

Pluralist Pressures and State Responses

Internal and external pressures are mounting on authoritarian regimes in Africa to introduce some measure of democratic reform. The worsening economic crises and pervasive political decline have exposed the inefficiency, as well as the vulnerability, of authoritarian rule. As a World Bank report put it :

In many African countries the administrations, judiciaries, and educational institutions are now mere shadows of their former selves. Equally worrying is the widespread impressions of political decline. Corruption, oppression, and nepotism are increasingly evident. These are hardly unique in Africa, but they may have been exacerbated by development strategies that concentrate power and resources in government bureaucracies, without countervailing measures to ensure public accountability or political consensus. On the one hand, in several countries the neglect of due process has robbed institutions of their legitimacy and credibility. On the other hand, the proliferation of administrative regulations has encouraged corruption and set the individual against the state.(17)

The call for democratic political reform has come from those who have been excluded from the decision-making process - various sections of the middle classes, particularly intellectuals and professionals. Internal pressures for democratization are motivated by a general desire for a more open system both politically and economically, hence the commitment to pluralistic democracy. For many internal forces in Africa, pluralism essentially entails the transformation of the one-party regime into a

multiparty system. For the emerging African bourgeoisie, the failure of economic recovery and development under socialist-oriented one-party rule leaves the door open for market-economy realism.

The level of internal pressures, and the degree of state responses to them, would seem to depend on the economic-base and political organization of the middle classes. "Where the middle class is considerably large, economically capable and cohesive, the political leadership is likely to bow to its demands... Those countries which resist power sharing formulae are likely to enter periods of political instability that will obviously be
(18)
detrimental to their economic growth."

Many countries have resumed or accepted some measure of political pluralism (e.g. Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Senegal), while others at least pay lip-service to plural politics. Nyong'o notes some interesting emerging patterns in state responses to these pressures. "The old British colonies which have never been disturbed by military rule and have been under presidential authoritarian systems throughout the independence period, seem the most reluctant to democratize." (e.g. Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania). The ruling elites in these countries still maintain their defence of the merits of the one-party system. More significant is the fact that pro-Marxist regimes have been more responsive on the whole to democratization demands. (e.g. Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Congo-Brazaville, Benin). In some countries there has been a process of cooptation whereby a pluralist structure is imposed from above. (e.g. Nigeria and the
(19)
Franophone states, notably Senegal).

In all cases a pattern has set in : as popular pressures for democratization intensify, concessions to some measure of plural politics are belatedly made. The economic and political cost of resistance to

pluralist pressures is proving to be progressively prohibitive. It has resulted in the overthrow of regimes by popular armed struggle (e.g. Ethiopia, Somalia), in protracted civil war (e.g. the Sudan), in violent disturbances (e.g. Zaire), and in destabilization and increasing isolation (e.g. Kenya). By contrast, the demise of authoritarian rule in Zambia through due electoral process has not only shown that transition to pluralist politics need not be violent but also that the democratic precedent can become a contributory element in influencing the democratization process in other countries (e.g. Kenya).

Part of the problem in trying to determine why states respond as they do is that we are dealing with a situation which is still in flux. State responses can be more of an expression of frustration with the working of the existing model than of a commitment to a proposed one. What may seem to be the onset of the transitional stage can turn out to be a ploy to destabilize the opposition. A related problem of transition is the tendency to create an authorized opposition which, as Dawisha notes, assumes the role of an official 'devil's advocate' (20)

External pressures for economic liberalization and political democratization are manifested in the new conditionality for Western aid and investment. While African democrats welcome this new conditionality as a useful weapon in the democratization process, there is considerable uneasiness about the motivations behind it. Many Africans are suspicious that the West is using the conditionality to reduce Africa's share of the global assistance that is now East-bound. Salim Lone argues that the advent of democratization is not going to suddenly generate capital inflows (21) because the compelling economic and political rationales do not exist. There is also general scepticism about the viability of market economy prescriptions in Western aid programmes.

One problem with this kind of external pressure is that its very effectiveness depends on universal rather than selective application. But, paradoxically, the more effective the application, the less attractive it becomes to the recipient. If investment and development assistance is not coming large enough and fast enough, there may be little incentive for the authoritarian regime to risk the painful political and economic structural adjustments that are likely to make the regime more vulnerable. The limitations on the conditionality of democratization may become more pronounced as the marginalization of Africa in international discourse continues. (22)

IV

Future Prospects

The democratization process in Africa has been described as entailing the second coming of African independence. The process has set in motion tremendous forces that can have far-reaching implications for the future of democracy in Africa. Will democratization necessarily entail a better performance of the state, a more equitable allocation of resources, and a more secure commitment to the civil and human rights of individuals and communities? How can these positive tendencies be encouraged and strengthened? Or will the overall impact of democratization possibly be to rekindle and reinforce the kind of disintegrative forces that are currently plaguing some of the emerging democracies in Eastern Europe? How can these negative forces be mitigated and contained?

There is no reason why it should be an either/or situation. Elements of both forces can be simultaneously at work. The interplay between these forces as well as within them, is invariably influenced by the level of pluralist pressures and the degree of state responses. These, in turn,

will most likely determine the nature and duration of the crucial transitional stage to pluralist democracy.

The general trend, so far, is more positive than negative. The content of democratic transformation in some African countries has been relatively peaceful and more real than artificial. More African states are moving towards pluralist politics than in the opposite direction. The process itself can become self-generating and contagious.

Democratization has become the burning issue (sometimes literally) in almost every part of the world. But the African experience in this respect (with the possible exception of the unique South African situation) has received less attention than the more dramatic developments elsewhere, particularly in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Given the interrelation and linkages between these phenomena the African experience needs to be evaluated in its own right as well as in relation to others.

Notes and References

- (1) Robert Falton Jr., "Liberal Democracy in Africa", Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 105, No. 3, New York, Fall 1990.

I

- (2) According to David Held, "Democracy is a remarkably difficult form of government to create and sustain ... The history of the idea of democracy is complex and is marked by conflicting conceptions ... The meaning of democracy has remained, and probably always will remain, unsettled." David Held, Models of Democracy (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987) pp. 2-3. See also C.B. Macpherson, The Real World of Democracy, Oxford University Press, 1966).
- (3) For detailed studies of group theory see David B. Truman, The Governmental Process (New York, 1950); William E. Conolly (ed) The Bias of Pluralism (Antherton Press, New, 1969; Arthur F. Bentley; The Process of Government : A Study of Social Pressure (Evanston, 1955); S.M. Lipset, Political Man : The Social Bases of Politics (Doubleday, N.Y., 1960).
- (4) Rodee, Anderson, Christol, Green, Introduction to Political Science (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1983) pp. 168.
- (5) See Leo Kuper and M.G. Smith (eds.), Pluralism in Africa (University of California Press, 1969).
- (6) J.S. Furnivall quoted in Arend Lijphart, Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration (Yale University Press, 1977) p. 18 Lijphart refers to the frequent criticism that the concept of plural society is too broad and encompasses too much. He argues that it is imperative

to "be alert to qualitative and quantitative differences within the broad category of plural societies; differences between different kinds of segmental clearances and differences in the degree to which a society is plural." pp. 17-18

(7) Lijphart op.cit. pp. 19-20.

(8) Leonard Binder, "National Integration and Political development", American Political Science Review Vol. 58 No. 3 (September 1964). Cited in ibid. Also relevant in this context is Lucian W. Pye's linkage of political development with a sense of a deep identification with the total system.

(9) Lijphart's "consociational democracy" model has four basic elements : a grand coalition of the political leaders of all significant segments of the plural society; the mutual veto or "concurrent majority" rule; proportionality in political representation and in allocation of public funds; and a high degree of segmental autonomy. p. 25

II

(10) Peter Anyang Nyong'o, "Democratization Process in Africa", AAPS Newsletter, Nairobi, March 1991. See also by the same author (ed.): Popular Struggle for Democracy in Africa (Zed books, London, 1987); Africa : State, Democracy and Popular Struggles (CODESRIA Publications, Addis Ababa, 1986); and "The Disintegration of the Nationalist Coalition and the Rise of Presidential Authoritarianism in Kenya", African Affairs, Vol. 88, No. 351 (April 1989).

(11) T. Mkandawire, "Comments on Democracy and Political Instability" CODESRIA Bulletin Vol. I, 1989. Cited in Abdelgalil M. Elmekki,

"Dependence and Authoritarianism in the Post-Colonial Development of the Sudan." (Unpublished paper, Khartoum, 1991). Commenting on the controversy over definitions and concepts in the Nyong'o - Mkandawire debate, Elmekki writes, "It is clear in the exchange that the very definition of democracy is a centre of contention, and that country specifications in Africa sometimes generate contradictory conclusions ... Whether democracy and development are taken as goals or as processes would make a difference in the debate and raise different sets of questions. Whether democracy and development are to be taken jointly or separately in popular struggles is the most vital issue in the debate."

(12) Samir Amin, "The state and the Question of Development" in Nyong'o (ed.) Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa p. 1.

(13) Kivutha Kibwana, "Democracy and Constitutionalism in Africa", AAPS Newsletter, Nairobi, December 1990. Kibwana cautions that, "one-party pluralism where it exists, is thus a transitional category and should not, in any way, be confused with 'one-party democracy' which is mainly an ideological rationalization of the authoritarianism of the one-party state."

(14) Rainer Tetzlaff, Report on the conference on "Democracy and Economic Recovery in Africa", held in Arusha, Tanzania, 19-23 November 1990. Published by Ernst Stetter, Political Change and Democracy in Africa (Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Bonn, March 1991) p. 14.

Shivji's populist view is similar to M. Mamdani's "subjective conditions" for democratization : the political education and organization of the "popular forces." While such views may seem rhetorical, they can, nevertheless, serve as useful reminders of a

point often obscured in the debate of democratization, namely : the prospects for the mass of the population. It is generally assumed that democratic reforms can politically and economically benefit the emerging middle classes in Africa. But it is not clear whether the same assumption can be made in relation to the disadvantaged urban and rural masses.

(15) Ibid.

(16) Ibid.

III

(17) World Bank, Sub-Saharan Africa : From Crisis to Sustainable Growth quoted in Nyong'o, op.cit. According to Nyong'o, "there is no doubt that the popular pressures for democracy in Africa began with demands for a popular national state, and such demands have received stiff resistance from the state precisely because they threaten those interests served by perpetuating the status quo."

(18) Kibwana, op.cit.

(19) Nyong'o, op.cit., According to Nyong'o, state responses to democratization pressures in Africa (leaving out the North African states like Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) can be categorized as follows : pre-emptive channeling of democratization initiatives (Senegal, Nigeria, Uganda and Zaire); domesticating democratic initiatives through 'sluice-gate' reforms (Cameroon, Togo, Benin, and Ivory Coast); conditional surrender to open politics and pluralism (Mozambique, Angola, Congo-Brazaville, and Zambia); neither reform or reaction but an uneasy defence of the status quo (Malawi, Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia); complete

democratization (Cape Verde, Principe and Sao Tome, Mauritius, Botswana, and Seychelles).

(20) Abeed Dawisha and I. William Zartman (eds.), Beyond Coercion: The Durability of the Arab State (Croom Helm, New York, 1988).

(21) Salim Lone, "Eastern Europe, Africa's Needs and the United Nations" African Recovery Vol. 4, No. 1, New York, April-June 1990.

(22) Kibwana points out other limitations of Western pressures for political pluralism : "In most of the cases the political reforms will be imposed by donor countries, trading partners, generally Africa's Western friends. Because of this, the reforms are likely to be fragile. That is one reason we speculated that the emphasis, for some time, will rest on achieving 'outward democracy' - the form of democracy as opposed to substantive political pluralism." Kibwana, op.cit.