

## Democracy in Africa

Roger Southall

### The Liberal Model and Africa: Elites against Democracy

by Kenneth Good

Palgrave, 2002, 256 pp., ISBN  
0333717082

The 1990s, so we are widely told, ushered in a 'second liberation' in Africa. The Berlin Wall collapsed, the Cold War ended, dictatorships fell or liberalized, and military governments gave way to civilian. The African populace rose in protest against domestic oppressions and demanded and often seized back the liberties they were promised but denied at independence. Multi-party elections now became fashionable and well-meaning election monitors swarmed all over the continent passing judgement on whether contests were 'free and fair'. African populations breathed more freely and ostensibly or substantively lived in less fear. They were now set up to enjoy the fruits of 'good governance'. Democracy was enabled to enjoy a belated triumph.

All this was well and good, had it not been attended by much myth-making. Africa was very rapidly to find that the new deal had severe limits. Not the least of these was the fact that whilst democratizing countries secured greater Western approval and assistance, political and economic condi-

tionalties often hollowed out the genuine gains that were made. Rather like patients subjected to the tender mercies of medieval doctors, countries which had been bled under structural adjustment plans in the 1970s tant official positions was remunerated so that no citizen would be excluded on financial grounds. These, and other similar provisions, resulted in a conception of citizenship which was 'profound'. Ordinary men saw themselves not just as isolated individuals but as citizens with ties and responsibilities to the wider community; democratic ideology encouraged the distribution of wealth and the exercise of political power only by the wealthy; and poorer citizens were enabled to prevent their exploitation by the rich.

Good sees this model as having been rediscovered in the popular struggle against apartheid, as embodied most notably in the United Democratic Front (UDF) and COSATU. From the Durban strikes of 1973 on, black workers began the transformation of the internal resistance movement which moved away from the exiled ANC's concentration on external assault upon the apartheid state. They forged a democratic movement within the country, which was harnessed to independent working class action. This gave rise to a style of politics which emphasised grassroots participatory democracy, or 'people's power' as evidenced by the appearance of street committees and people's courts that were organisations concerned with dispute resolution and self-government. Meanwhile, the development of a trade

union movement which steered clear of 'the futile quest for the revolutionary overthrow of the apartheid state' led to engagement with both capital and the state, and the exertion of countervailing power, whilst simultaneously exemplifying a grassroots industrial democracy which emphasised the direct election of shop-stewards and the accountability of leaders.

Good goes on to argue that, faced by an internal culture of democracy that threatened its elitist practices (long honed in exile), the post-1990 ANC was quick to shut the UDF down. In contrast, COSATU's strength meant that a labour-repressive policy was not possible, and indeed the 'new South Africa' saw the creation of a relatively labour-friendly industrial regime. However, workers' organised muscle has been steadily eroded by the ANC's pro-capitalist policies, industrial restructuring and increasing unemployment. The potential of the highly promising experiment in participatory democracy has therefore not been realised. Nonetheless, nowhere else on the continent does the capacity, vested in an industrial working class, to challenge autocratic elites exist. However, Good is disappointingly vague on how popular power in South Africa can be revived and sustained. He refers to that challenge in a somewhat disappointing concluding chapter of just three pages as 'an unending struggle'. In contrast, my argument is that this pessimistic demand, for perpetual and uncompromising political activity by the masses is profoundly unrealistic, and hence too brutally pessimistic. Whilst the main

point is taken that the elitist proclivities of liberal democracy as it exists do need to be constantly challenged, democratic theory does provide us with suggestions about how we can amplify the very real advantages which liberal democracy offers (such as the ideas of individual rights and the limited state) alongside mechanisms and devices for insisting that it becomes more socially just and distributional.

This important book, which should be read widely and is a major contribution to thinking about democracy in Africa, is the product of an expatriate scholar working out of a university in what is the continent's most highly celebrated liberal democracy. Good has been an inveterate and brave critic of the Botswana government, which continues to tolerate his railings, and which continues to allow the university to renew his successive short term contracts. He is wholly and utterly aware that he would not enjoy such favourable conditions if – as earlier in his career – he was teaching in neighbouring Zimbabwe. Ultimately, therefore, it is this personal irony which raises the biggest issues around Good's thesis, suggesting the need for more nuance in his theorizing than he allows. Nonetheless, this does not detract from the fact that Good has written a really important book which moves us forward, and which should compel the salesmen of liberal democracy who are to be found in almost every Western aid agency to confront some peculiarly uncomfortable truths. ■

