

Leadership in Africa: From Autocracy to the Voice of the Voiceless

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In June 1998, Gérard Prunier and I were invited to speak at a one-day seminar on conflicts in Africa by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm. During the discussion, the moderator asked us to comment on this notion of new breed of African leaders, a category that then included Thabo Mbeki (South Africa), Meles Zenawi (Ethiopia), Yoweri Museveni (Uganda), Paul Kagame (Rwanda), and Isaias Afewerki (Eritrea). By coincidence, Prunier had an article on the subject by Marina Ottaway, which extolled the virtues of these great and dear leaders, and proceeded to approvingly read the catalogue, in which they were described as self-reliant nation-builders and practitioners of good governance.

When my turn came to respond, I begged to disagree; pointing out that the two men from my neighborhood in the Great Lakes Region were not self-reliant at all, being among the highest recipients of foreign aid from their Western allies. One of them, Uganda’s Museveni, was hardly new, having been in power since January 1986, and presiding over a very corrupt system. Other than Mbeki, whose country’s strong private sector and viable civil

society could temper autocratic tendencies, the other leaders, and particularly Museveni, Kagame and Isaias, were accomplished dictators. I added that it was most insulting to compare them favorably with some of our founding fathers, among whom Julius Nyerere, Kenneth Kaunda, and Samora Machel had shown real commitment to pan-Africanism and self-reliance, by giving total support to armed struggle in Southern Africa, thus exposing their own countries to destabilization by the fascist and racist states.

Fifteen years later, it is evident that there is no major distinction between the first generation of leaders and the supposedly new breed, who all cling to power through force and electoral authoritarianism, including the jailing of their most prominent opponents. Kagame has won his two presidential elections by 95 and 93 per cent of the vote cast. Both Kagame and Museveni have also forged strong alliances with the United States in order to strengthen their repressive apparatuses, without which they cannot retain control. While Isaias's rule is literally a nightmare for Eritreans, many of whom have died in the Sinai and the Mediterranean in their attempt to flee to a better life in Europe, Museveni and Kagame are responsible for crimes against humanity, which have resulted in over six million deaths in my country, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Moreover, Museveni's wife of 40 years, Janet Kataaha, is a cabinet minister, and their 39-year old son, Muhoozi Kainerugaba is a brigadier general in the Uganda People's Defense Forces (UPDF), in which he is the commander of the praetorian guard. As it is customary with our life presidents in Africa, Muhoozi is being groomed for dynastic succession as the next president of Uganda. Same old breed of autocratic rule, isn't it?

Leadership Deficit in Africa

Africa suffers from a leadership deficit. During the struggle for independence, virtually all the classes of colonized Africans united in a national alliance against colonialism, led by the petty bourgeois élite. This alliance broke down following independence, because the liberation struggle had masked the conflicts of interests between the petty bourgeoisie and the popular masses. As brilliantly described by the historian Jacob Ade Ajayi, ordinary people had expected

that independence would bring about both freedom and material prosperity (or what I would call democracy and social progress). These "expectations of independence" were not fulfilled. Meanwhile, the nationalist leaders who had led the independence struggle went on to accumulate power and wealth in order to join the ranks of the rich and superrich of today's world. With the exception of the fight against apartheid and for total decolonization, these leaders would give only lip service to the pan-African project of self-determination politically, self-reliance economically, and pan-African solidarity internationally.

This breakdown of the national alliance has been clearly analyzed by Amílcar Cabral and Frantz Fanon. Cabral makes two critical points in this regard. The first is that since the people expected the expansion of the space of fundamental rights and liberties long violated by the colonialists, the nationalist leaders had a moral obligation to ensure a better life for the people in liberated territories. In a directive to the cadres of the African Party for the Independence of Guiné and Cape Verde (PAIGC), he wrote as follows:

Always remember that the people do not struggle for ideas, for things in the heads of individuals. The people struggle and accept the sacrifices demanded by the struggle, but in order to gain material advantages, to be able to live a better life in peace, to see their lives progress and to ensure their children's future. National liberation, the struggle against colonialism, working for peace and progress – independence – all these are empty words without meaning for the people, unless they are translated into a real improvement in standards of living. It is useless to liberate an area, if the people of that area are left without the basic necessities of life.

In the second place, Cabral raises the question of whether the postcolonial state can achieve this objective within the framework of the colonially inherited structures of the state and the economy in a world system based on unequal exchange. In other words, the fundamental question that Cabral raises is to know whether an independent state based on the same system of capitalist exploitation as the colonial state can satisfy the basic needs of African workers and peasants. Answering this question in the negative, Cabral asks his followers

in the same directive "to destroy the economy of the enemy and build our own economy." He went on to underline this incompatibility between the inherited colonial economy and state machinery with the needs and aspirations of ordinary Africans in an informal talk with a group of African Americans on October 20, 1972 in New York:

We are not interested in the preservation of any of the structures of the colonial state. It is our opinion that it is necessary to totally destroy, to break, to reduce to ash all aspects of the colonial state in our country in order to make everything possible for our people. ... Some independent African states preserved the structures of the colonial state. In some countries they only replaced a white man with a black man, but for the people it is the same. ... The nature of the state we have to create in our country is a very good question for it is a fundamental one. ... It is the most important problem in the liberation movement. The problem of the nature of the state created after independence is perhaps the secret of the failure of African independence.

For Cabral, as for Fanon, the point of departure is a rejection of neocolonialism and the neocolonial state. When they talk of "the lack of ideology" as one of Africa's major problems, they refer to the lack of commitment to a democratic developmental state in which the leaders choose to identify fully with the deepest aspirations of the people rather than with the world system, its dominant classes and the anti-social policies of the financial institutions under their control. Unfortunately, only a handful of African leaders can be said to have been "born again" as defenders of their people's interests. The majority of leaders, on the other hand, continue to manage in a rather routine fashion the raw materials based and export-oriented economies of Africa. In so doing, they are likely to remain the objective allies of the dominant interests of capitalist globalization, which are the main beneficiaries of raw materials exports and capital flight to the markets of the North and those of the emerging economic powers of China, Brazil and India. By refusing to "follow the path of revolution," as Fanon wrote over fifty years ago, such leaders are content with playing the neocolonial role of intermediary between advanced capitalism and their people. The major

consequences of this option are the development of a state bourgeoisie, or what Fanon called a “bourgeoisie of the civil service,” bent on using state institutions as a means of self-enrichment; the deeper underdevelopment of the country; and the further impoverishment of the popular masses. Having betrayed the revolution, postcolonial rulers have broken their organic links to the masses of the African people.

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Thus, to overcome its leadership deficit, Africa needs to generate new leaders who identify fully with the aspirations, needs and interests of African workers and peasants. The history of the DRC or Congo-Kinshasa provides two examples of the possibilities of transforming leadership from autocracy to the “voice of the voiceless.” I am using the name of a prominent human rights NGO whose founder, Floribert Chebeya Bahizire, was assassinated by the Joseph Kabila regime during the night of June 1-2, 2010 in Kinshasa. Chebeya’s organization, La Voix des Sans Voix (VSV) was founded in 1983 and has done an excellent job in documenting and denouncing human rights violations, including extralegal killings, arbitrary arrests, and corruption.

The first and perhaps the most important example of constructive and transformative leadership in the Congo was the work of progressive Lumumbists in support of a popular insurrection whose participants called it the movement for a “second independence.” Interestingly, the very concept around which the insurrection was organized was not a product of academics or petty bourgeois intellectuals. It came out of the political practice of the organic intellectuals of the peasants of the Bandundu province, who had formulated their own notions and ideas to understand the post-independence situation.

For these people, the independence won from the Belgians on June 30, 1960 had failed because it did not fulfill their aspirations for freedom and material prosperity. The new black rulers were different from the former white rulers in skin color, but were liars and no different with respect to looking after their own welfare and in oppressing the people. They were the «new whites.» But in order to maintain themselves in power, they

continued to rely on the “old whites” for advising, training, and equipping the repressive apparatus of the state. The first independence had failed; there was need for a “second independence.”

Congolese peasant intellectuals had thus done an analysis of the transition from colonialism to neocolonialism that is quite identical to the two-phase theory of national liberation by Amilcar Cabral. During the first or national phase, that of the struggle for independence, all strata of the population are united in the fight against the colonial system. When independence is achieved, the second or social phase becomes a period of class struggles, and the interests of the élites and the masses diverge. During this phase, according to Cabral, the fundamental task of liberation is the struggle against neocolonialism.

In the Congo, as Alain Badiou and François Balmès have written concerning the ideological resistance of ordinary people in general, the ideas of the popular masses against exploitation and oppression did not remain dormant until professional intellectuals or revolutionaries appeared to guide their materialization. For the masses, too, have their own intellectuals, as we have learned from Antonio Gramsci. However, the rebellions through which ordinary people’s ideas and sentiments are expressed have very little chance of changing the system radically in the absence of modern organizational resources necessary for a long and protracted struggle. These resources include a leadership capable of analyzing the balance of forces correctly, and of charting an appropriate course of action. In the Congo of the early 1960s, the only group that was well placed to play this leadership role was that of the radical wing of the Lumumbist camp, whose leaders included Pierre Mulele.

Mulele attempted to systematize the ideas, notions and thoughts of the masses into a coherent analysis of the situation and a revolutionary program of action for purposes of transforming it radically. His systematization was done through a Marxist-Leninist framework of class analysis together with a Maoist strategy of political education and guerrilla warfare. Schoolteachers, nurses, state and company clerks and secondary school students formed the ranks of disciplined

cadres that he trained for the struggle. They joined unemployed urban youths and peasants in what became a profoundly popular and rural insurrection. Begun in 1963, the insurrection ended in 1968 with Mulele’s return to Kinshasa under false promises of national reconciliation, and his brutal execution by Mobutu’s generals. Since time does not permit a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the second independence movement, its major lesson for us today is the collaboration between the organic intellectuals of ordinary people and revolutionary intellectuals in order to give voice to hitherto voiceless strata of the population. This collaboration did establish a truly constructive and transformative leadership that Africa needs for democracy and social progress.

The second example of the emergence of a non-autocratic and a new type of leadership for the voiceless is the phenomenon of *parlementaires-debout*, or “street parliamentarians,” which arose in Kinshasa in December 1992 in the wake of the Sovereign National Conference. This political reforms and constitutional forum took place as part of the democratization wave that swept Africa in the early 1990s, for purposes of interrogating the past and charting a new course for the future. The fact that conference proceedings were broadcast live on national radio and television turned this forum into a great educational experience for the country as a whole, giving ordinary people the ability to influence the proceedings through letters and other means, strengthening civil society, and making citizens better informed about their country’s realities.

Discussing politics on the sidewalks near newspaper stands became so popular that finding correct information, analyzing it publicly, and taking action to influence future developments gave rise to the idea of imitating what the politicians were doing. Thus, if the latter were to sit in the transitional parliament established by the national conference, young people in Kinshasa thought that they, too, could become parliamentarians, albeit those standing in the shade of a tree rather than sitting at the People’s Palace to deliberate on public affairs. The first street parliament in downtown Kinshasa was eventually duplicated with a parliament in every commune. These forums debated current issues, took decisions, and



sought ways of implementing them. Major actions included publicly denouncing opposition politicians who were seen as faltering in their resolve for democratic change, and organizing rallies and demonstrations in support of various demands of the democracy movement. Although supportive of democracy leader Etienne Tshisekedi and providing him with whatever protection they could for his safety, the “street parliamentarians” were independent of him and his party, the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès Social (UDPS). Unfortunately, the UDPS failed to establish a strong working alliance with this youth political organization, and to use it as a recruiting ground for the future leaders of the country.

Conclusion

For purposes of promoting and consolidating democracy and social progress, Africa does not need modernizing elites, big men or women, or a “new breed of leaders” who are in fact militarists and dictators. The most appropriate leadership is likely to emerge from mass-based organizations in which revolutionary intellectuals work hand in hand with the organic leaders of our peasants, workers, women, and the youth. Following Chebeya’s example as a human rights activist in the DRC, the leadership emerging from these mass-based organizations must consist of women and men of integrity. They must

represent veritable democratic forces, imbued with patriotism and enjoying the people’s confidence. Given the interests at stake economically and strategically in the larger world, these women and men must of necessity be irreproachable nationalists and pan-Africanists, and personalities who would defend against all odds the highest interests of their respective nations and of Africa as a whole.

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