

Who Will "Save" Africa?

Neither the "Western Saviour" nor the "African Messiah"

On March 31, 2012 I attended a conference at the University of Illinois, Chicago. The theme "The Congo: Reclaiming its Destiny," captured my imagination when I saw a flier on a notice board at Northwestern University's Program of African Studies. The conference brought together scholars, students, journalists, and human rights activists, both Congolese and other nationalities, to reflect on the continuing crises in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a country which, to be sure, is neither democratic nor a republic.

The eminent Congolese political scientist, Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, a professor of African Studies at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, delivered a powerful and impassioned keynote address, calling on the people of Congo to take matters into their hands and urging the so-called international community to take the Congolese seriously as capable of turning around their troubled country. Professor Nzongola remains one of the most important contemporary African scholars and a true citizen intellectual with an illustrious professional career, plying his trade in the American academe but remaining firmly engaged in the political processes of his homeland.

Nzongola's talk, "Elections and the Future of Democracy in the DRC," tackled head-on the 2011 fraudulent election in which the incumbent Joseph Kabila was declared winner over his main challenger Dr. Etienne Tshisekedi wa Mulumba. Since rejecting the election result, the latter remains practically under house arrest at his home in the capital Kinshasa. According to Nzongola, Tshisekedi, a veteran opposition politician, was by far the most popular candidate and Kabila had no chance, at all, of defeating him in a free and fair electoral contest. Nzongola, needless to say, has been closely associated with the opposition in Congo and has served as an advisor to Tshisekedi and other opposition politicians.

Responding to Nzongola's presentation was renowned journalist and author, Mvemba Dizolele, visiting fellow at the prestigious Hoover Institution at Stanford University. He has been one of the most outspoken Congolese intellectuals, stressing the role of neighboring states like Rwanda and Uganda in abetting inter-ethnic and fratricidal bloodletting in the eastern part of the country, and faulting the Western powers for being complicit in the never-ending ghastly plunder of resources from the Congo.

Mvemba hardly disagreed with Nzongola, and perhaps was not the right person to respond to the latter's presentation. But both raised two points that speak to two sides of the same coin. First, apparently, when asked what he planned to do in the aftermath of the stolen vote, the opposition leader Tshisekedi said he was waiting for the outcome of a US Senate committee promised by Secretary of State for African Affairs, Johnnie

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Carson! Mr. Tshisekedi was counting on the Obama administration, through Carson and a promised committee, to investigate the electoral fiasco and supply solutions for the people of Congo!

Second, Mvemba spoke of his indignation, while in Congo last fall doing election monitoring for the Carter Center, seeing Tshisekedi's aids and supporters treating their man as a messiah. Many were awed, Mvemba told the conference audience, that he could talk to the old man in a candid and no-holds-barred conversation. Interestingly, the savvy and perceptive Mvemba found this messianic opposition leader remotely inspiring. These two stories were my take-home from the conference. I went away persuaded, more than ever, that the task at hand for most of Africa is to liberate both the intelligentsia and the masses from the bondage of believing in "Western saviors" and "African messiahs."

The messianic post-independence politicians delivered most of the continent to anything but the promised land of socioeconomic transformation and genuine democratic governance. The second wave of reformist messiahs like Uganda's Yoweri Museveni (in power for 26 years and still counting), Burkina Faso's Blaise Compaore (25 years), Ethiopia's Meles Zinawi (21 years), et al, have presided over autocratic regimes that largely serve the interests of transnational capital and the security interests of the US with its European allies while the majority of Africans continue to wallow in abject poverty.

Fortunately many an African intellectual increasingly realizes the folly of hankering for foreign saviors and domestic messiahs. The speed and swiftness with which Ugandans and other African commentators caustically responded to the viral "Kony 2012" film may have sent a signal, one hopes, to those "good intentioned" humanitarianists in the West, looking for African victims to save, that they need to change the narrative about this continent of victims. There is no gainsaying the dire conditions in most of Africa, but only if those with good intentions of "saving" Africa went about their activities with some measure of humility, may be, just may be... But alas, the hubris and arrogance if not ignorance, is simply bewildering.

While Africans can do only so much about the excesses of "Western saviors" and transnational forces in a country like Congo, they can do a lot, I think, to resist the misdeeds of domestic messiahs and coteries of power seekers: mustering the temerity to say no to misrule. That the people of Senegal could stand up against a stale Abdoulaye Wade, in spite of state repression, attests to the power of a people reclaiming their destiny.



The people of Congo have been reduced to being the subject of every bad statistic, and aid agencies don't tire in informing the world that Congo is the worst place on earth on almost every socioeconomic, and even political, indicator. But as founding Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, stated in a letter to his wife more than four decades ago, the people

of Congo are caged and are looked at "outside the bars, sometimes with charitable compassion, sometimes with glee and delight."

When anything positive is said about Congo, it's to repeat an old and tired line of a country rich in minerals and other natural resources. Not many remember (or

do they know?) that this country has also produced some of the finest thinkers on the continent as well as big names in the world of sport, in the NBA, European League Football, etc.

Not just the people of Congo, but the entire African citizenry must reclaim the destiny of the continent.