

## On 'Icons' and African Perspectives on Democracy: A Commentary on Jibrin Ibrahim's Views

In the context of Jibrin Ibrahim's polemic against 'Icons', it could easily be retorted that the opposite of 'Icon' is 'neophyte' (from the Greek word, *neophytes*, meaning 'newly planted'). Whether we think of it as 'newly initiated' or 'novice' the emotive connotations would not be soothing to anybody's ego. Therefore, why appeal to those terrible things, human passions - green, yellow, and red? Why not keep to essence - black and white - so that we can tell with clarity whether it is a funeral or a wedding; a requiem for the 'icons' or an overture for 'neophytes'.

Jibrin Ibrahim's strictures against what he calls 'icons' can neither be clarified nor validated because they violate all the rules of intellectual discourse. First, nowhere in his diatribe does he define his terms. Second, he uses abstracted single sentences as substitute for studied texts. Third, he shows great disregard for historical and empirical facts. Fourth and most disconcertingly, he has no argument but merely a series of subjective complaints. Fifth and sadly, he seems to be oblivious of the dangers of "finger-pointing" or of *ad hominem* accusations. Failure to become "unabashed celebrants of liberalism" does not in all honesty render any of Ibrahim's chosen 'icons' liable to accusations of having spent 'too little time learning or practising (in this case fighting for) democracy'. To be a breaker of images (*eikonoklastes* in Greek), one does not have to be a jaundiced biographer, a theoretical nihilist, or an epistemological anarchist. This defeats the whole purpose of intellectual discourse and militates against the development of an intellectual community. Therefore, without minimizing the importance of Ibrahim's legitimate concern and disillusionment with senior African scholars, it behoves everybody to play the game according to the rules.

### On Liberalism and Liberal Democracy

Jibrin Ibrahim simply fails to define either of these two terms. The nearest he comes to define 'liberal democracy' is to make a vague reference to people's "attachment to

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their civil and political rights as individuals". Be it noted that the shift in his formulation from collective nouns and pronouns to individuals is mystifying. Sociologically-understood, at what point does collective political action become the social property of individuals and defensible by them as such?

Contrary to liberal ideology, what became known as individual freedom, rights, or civil rights, is not attributable to individual achievements but rather to social struggles. In the case of feudal Europe it was a question of liberating whole classes from either bondage or political subordination. It is obvious that to liberate people from generalised servitude or oppression, recognition of the individual has great intrinsic as well as strategic value. However, this does not detract from the fact that social liberation of any kind is a collective responsibility.

This is an issue which plagued European bourgeois social thought and philosophy until the first quarter of this century. For both its realisation and protection bourgeois individualism relied on collective action. This irony of history did not escape the attention of such well-known '*laissez-faire*' individualists as Auguste Comte (1789-1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Their problem was how to reconcile individual freedom with the necessity for social organisation. Accepting the latter as a necessary evil, they resolved the issue by drawing a sharp distinction between the 'state' and 'civil society'. In this context the state was seen as generally inclined to impose its will on individuals and it was thought that individuals could save themselves from the imposition by insisting on independent existence outside the state. Thus 'civil society' came to symbolise a community of private citizens who by virtue of their collective existence and

political vigilance guaranteed individual freedom. Part of this was, of course, illusory for two major reasons.

First, as is known, civil society derived its strength from organisation. Secondly, insofar as civil society is organised into different social groups with different interests, it is open to social competition for power. Thus, the necessity for social organisation and the self-imposing imperative to protect common interests in practice make nonsense of the abstracted 'individual' of the *laissez-faire* theorists. Without collective commitment, individuals cannot be defended. The significance of this assertion becomes apparent only if we are able to decide in our own minds whether individuals are subjects or objects of freedom. Bourgeois thinkers became self-contradictory on this matter because while they insisted on individualism and treated the state with great suspicion, they at the time maintained that not only was it the right of the state to guarantee civil liberties but also its duty to protect them. But the state could not guarantee all this, without reserving the right to overrule individuals or even groups if justified according to the same constitution which theoretically binds it to its citizens.

The second major point is that the counter position between 'state' and 'civil society' is part of bourgeois mystification because it fails to identify the state according to its origins and social character. There is no such a thing as an undifferentiated civil society. Part of civil society accounts for the origins and the social character of the state and this part is organised to guarantee the social reproduction of the state and benefits by it. For instance, what is popularly called 'petit bourgeois' / 'neo-colonial' governments in Africa is not autogenous apparitions but rather a reflection of the social interests of the emergent African elites. Sociologically, these are identifiable as the educated elite, politicians, senior bureaucrats, estate/commercial farmers, and businessmen - mainly parasitic merchants.

Despite the denial of civil liberties and frequent violation of human rights in Africa, these elements swear by bourgeois democracy and in most cases it is written into their national constitutions. They are sufficiently indoctrinated in bourgeois ideology and in their own inferiority that they are consumed by a great desire for bourgeois respectability. When this cannot suffice, they opportunistically appeal to 'traditional' African values such as the justification for the one-party state and life presidencies in Africa. They know that, objectively, they cannot afford bourgeois democracy and the most they can do is to pretend. The result is that there are neither guiding principles nor authenticity in the running of national affairs. In the circumstances the road is open to arbitrary and personalized use of power by the rulers and what would have been the objective functions of the state, even a reactionary one, become secondary. Contrary to Ibrahim's fervent belief, the cure of this socio-political aberration is not reversion to liberal democracy anywhere in the world. This is, indeed a foreclosure which befits an 'icon'. However, in mitigation it can be stated that it is not born of dogmatism but of a more than casual reading of the development of bourgeois democracy.

Philosophically speaking, World War I marked the end of 'liberal democracy' as a leading bourgeois ideology. Different issues had emerged. First was the question of whether 'bourgeois democracy' was realisable at all in ex-colonial countries dominated by imperialism. This was raised by socialist idealists in the wake of the Russian revolution. Their concern was not repudiation of civil liberties as had been attained under liberal democracy but rather socialist democracy which was seen as a negation of class rule and exploitation. Although this got associated with the 'proletariat' revolution and international 'socialism' among Marxists or members of the Third International, the critique of liberal democracy itself was not limited to them. It had become general in capitalist countries in a way which is hardly acknowledged by their historians. The risk of labour parties or social democratic parties in different parts of Western Europe and the failure of the liberal parties to win popular support in the inter-war period and after the Second World War were strong pointers to the inadequacies of liberal democracy. These did not centre on civil liberties but on actual distribution of power and wealth. This re-

mains the issue whether raised inside or outside capitalist societies.

In this connection it is well to remember that social indictment is not about the good that is given but about the good that is seen but denied. Therefore, it is rather inane to suppose that a critique of liberal democracy is necessarily a denial of the value of the rights which liberal democracy ushered in its heyday. Consequently, the cutting edge of any contemporary demands for democracy should be the perceived good which is denied by existing social systems. If, for instance, liberal democracy is offered as a sop to the African 'masses', is it not the duty of African intellectuals to show in what ways this is historically fraudulent? It might come as a surprise to Ibrahim to discover that his African 'icons' did not have to 'demolish' liberal democracy because that had already been done by the societies which invented it.

First, it was European voters who passed a negative verdict against liberal parties in the aftermath of World War I. It was not an ideological revulsion but a well-founded perception of the good that was not being delivered. This did not become crystal clear until the onset of the 'Deep Depression' of 1929-1933. Liberal individualism could not give any solace to multitudes of unemployed and starving individuals nor could 'laissez-faire' theories of the 19th century suffice. The liberal model with its trickle-down suppositions had collapsed. This cleared the way for the Keynesian revolution in economics. Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' was jettisoned in favour of the visible hand of the state in the management of national economies. For political expediency, the state interference in the allocation of labour and resources, and in the redistribution of value in the form of free social services was beguilingly referred to as 'indicative planning'. In fact, this signalled the rise of the welfare state which had different ideological underpinnings from those of liberal individualism or 'laissez-faire'. The governments of the day were called upon to intervene to stimulate economic growth, to create employment, and to guarantee the livelihood of the unemployed/unemployable. This is precisely what the social democrats had been agitating for since the end of the 19th century.

In the circumstances the only crime the African 'icons' might have committed is

to take all this for granted and for good historical reasons to ask for more. It is the 'more' which is, theoretically and politically, interesting because it is not self-evident. It leads to divergent views which are worth considering in their own right, especially with regard to the question of whether or not African and other Third World countries can hope to reproduce the socio-historical experience of the West. Failure to confront this fundamental question can only lead to such dripping-wet arguments as 'half a loaf is better than no bread'. These are no arguments but jaded apologetics which sounded the death knell of liberalism – the inclination to be charitable where else fails. Although Ibrahim confuses "liberalism" with "liberal democracy", the two terms have come to denote two entirely different things. "Liberalism" has become an expression of contempt in intellectual and political debates precisely because it does not offer any solutions but apologies. Witness the contempt in which democratic Americans hold 'liberals' since the doomed attempt by President Truman to set the clock back after World War II. Yet, the Americans nationally are willing to destroy half of humanity in defence of "liberal democracy". Social democracy having been publicly renounced on their continent, the Europeans are also willing to beat the drums of war but are not brash enough to do it themselves. In the circumstances, why would any self-respecting African 'icon' be expected to condone such cynicism and to engage in a feckless parody of 'liberal democracy'?

### On "Liberal" and "Socialist Democracy"

On this particular issue Jibrin Ibrahim can be accused of muddled thinking and a woeful lack of sense of historiography. Metaphorically, albeit inelegantly, it could be said that: "liberal democracies evolved social democracy". But, historically and analytically, this obscures the fact that it was those who objected to the omissions of liberal democracy, namely, the workers and their socialist/Marxist allies, who were instrumental in the evolution of social democracy within *bourgeois* society. Secondly, if 'liberal democracies' is used as a metaphor for bourgeois society, then it must be granted that, historically, bourgeois society produced a number of other things such as fascism, dictatorships, socialists, Marxists, colonialists, racists, and imperialists. To avoid depicting

Ibrahim as a starry-eyed neophyte, it could be granted that he knows about all these things but that his ideological interest is to affirm the virtues of liberal democracy and to decry the iniquities of “socialism” or Marxist doctrines. The moment for this type of exercise could not be any more felicitous. However, history does not begin or end with the rise and fall of the so-called socialist societies in Eastern Europe.

It is very demeaning to suggest that American ‘icons’ should celebrate ‘liberal democracy’ simply because “socialist regimes did nothing else but degenerate into dictatorships. In the event what would be African about them? Or is their alleged ‘universalist Marxism’ the rub? Naturally the collapse of Eastern European societies has theoretical implications for socialists/Marxists but it does not dispose of social problems that inhere in capitalist society. The issue concerning ‘liberal democracy’ versus ‘social democracy’ was about distribution of the social product and political power between classes in capitalist societies. Whether this issue is referred to as “socialism” or “social democracy” is immaterial. What is of critical importance is that liberal democracy does not address it and consequently it got superseded by programmes which do. Everywhere the battle lines are drawn very clearly between the Right, which firmly believes in concentration of wealth and power and to that extent is prepared to dismantle the welfare state and to dispense with distributive justice, and the Left, which fervently believes in the redistribution of wealth and power in favour of underprivileged classes. The left having suffered defeat and loss of credibility since the reversals in Eastern Europe, is finding it difficult to formulate a new programme and to devise strategies for its implementation. At the same time, it is obvious that retreat into liberalism under conditions in which it has been over-taken by historical events is of no avail, despite Ibrahim’s illusions. New and critical thinking is what is required.

Pronouncements by African scholars, like any other, can fruitfully be reviewed against the background of changing historical perspectives. For instance, in rejecting liberalism and the limitations of liberal democracy as were experienced in Europe, the African ‘icons’ are sailing in well-chartered waters. In advocating socio-democracy as well as democratic pluralism, they are on firm ground since this has in fact become a universal issue

precisely because of the collapse of the so-called socialist societies in Eastern Europe. They helped to re-introduce the question of social democracy in ‘united’ Europe which, predictably, issued in the rise of fascism in Western Europe, the centre of wealth and privilege. Mahmood Mamdani’s point about the rights of citizens and ‘non-citizens’ would apply here but would not necessarily be attributable to ‘liberal democracy’ but rather to the anachronistic conception of the ‘nation-state’ at the moment of its historical suppression. In the Third World the collapse had the effect of intensifying popular rebellion against external control and comprador regimes in the wake of an aggressive drive by the Western powers to consolidate their global stranglehold in the name of a ‘new world order’, as is boisterously declared by “ugly American”. It is this popular energy which the Americans and their allies are trying to channel into ‘liberal’ solutions which they themselves have long forsaken. They patronise Third World countries by setting lower standards for them than for themselves and by telling them that ‘half a loaf is better than no bread’. Where is the full loaf? Is it the privilege of the Western bourgeoisie?

Universal struggles, despite the supposed collapse of “socialism”, would indicate that nowhere is this accepted unquestioningly. In Europe the struggle for social democracy is such that the triumphant right-wing is not able to consolidate the power of the bourgeoisie, without making social democratic concessions, as is shown by the vicissitudes of the Maastricht Treaty or the frustrated GATT talks for more than, six years. The pressures are felt most acutely at the national level. The gullible Eastern European reformist regimes have discovered, in the shortest possible time, the folly of offering liberal democracy at this historical juncture, without social democracy. Some have even imagined that they could escape their plight by selling their countries piece-meal to the West for a morsel of bread. Empty promises and the shutting of the floodgates has been the response from the West partly because of the fear of internal repercussions but basically because it still harbours imperialistic motives towards Eastern Europe. Therefore; the struggle for social democracy in Europe will continue unabated. What needs to be reviewed is the relationship between such struggles

and what was perhaps erroneously called ‘socialism’ in Eastern Europe. In this regard, Samir Amin is correct in maintaining that the collapse in Eastern Europe does not foreclose any discussion on socialism. However, it would seem that the burden for elucidating the logical implications of social democratic struggles by extra-population as happened in the past, falls squarely on the shoulders of the left.

There are pragmatic grounds for posing the question this way. In Third World countries the struggle for social democracy entails a number of other freedoms which might have already been attained in the North e.g. civil rights and national self-determination. Anti-imperialist struggles are still reality in their case and, nationally, denial of civil liberties by regimes which lack legitimacy but enjoy enough external support to hold onto power indefinitely is common-place. These jointly put the national question firmly on the agenda. Therefore Amin, Shivji and myself are hardly mistaken in emphasizing the right to self-determination and the right of the people to choose for themselves. It is also known that the people do not only want to be free to organise themselves and to express their views but also to have adequate access to means of livelihood or a fair share of the national product. This could mean any of a number of things. Therefore, in dismissing liberal democracy as inadequate it is incumbent upon the African ‘icons’ to say what their conception of the new dispensations would look like almost in the same way that progressive Northerners would be required to say what is the possible articulation between social democratic struggles in advanced capitalist countries and the transition to full social equity, whatever it is called.

In approaching the national question, say, in Africa it is an acceptable orthodoxy among African ‘icons’ to think in terms of a ‘democratic national alliance’, certain classes having been left out after independence. It is also a Marxist or socialist orthodoxy to think in terms of ‘classes’. But are members of a class always organised as such everywhere? For instance, what happened in Ethiopia, Chad, Somalia or Liberia? Was it a purely class phenomenon? It would seem that in evolving a social-construct for our social democratic revolution it would be necessary to take into consideration forms of social organisation other than ‘classes’. Claude Ake,



whom Ibrahim describes as a “ Universalist Marxist” , is at the same time credited with having made un-Marxist references to some ‘ societal characteristics’ in Africa which would be incompatible with liberal democracy. What would have been relevant here is to press Ake not only to identify such but also to evaluate them accordingly, for Wamba-dia-Wamba is chastised by Ibrahim for proposing to base African social democracy on traditional mechanisms such as the “ village palaver and Mbongi (lineage assembly)” .

Is all this romantic nonsense, as Ibrahim so strongly contends?

It is quite conceivable that here Ibrahim’ s liberal individualism is getting the better of him. But, suffice it to say, a close study of village palavers (which apparently are peculiar to Africa according to the Oxford English Dictionary) and *mbongi* has led one to yet another unMarxist conclusion, namely, that there is no necessary relationship between forms of social organization and the purpose for which they are used at different times in history. For in-

stance, African lineage can be used for presidential elections, capitalist accumulation, collectivisation, or planning at the community level. This area and its implications for social democracy and equity in Africa is largely *terranova*, especially to the African Marxist ‘ icons’ . Nonetheless, one dares to say that it is sheer perversity for Ibrahim to invite the few African ‘ icons’ who are on the march to abandon any search for alternative solutions and instead to lose themselves into a veritable jamboree in celebration of European ‘ liberal democracy’ , no matter how misconceived it might be.

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