

## Online Article

# Rethinking African Politics: The New Age of Political Parties

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### Introduction

I was recently asked by a group of African political scientists, led by Professor Christopher Isike of the University of Pretoria, intent on reviving the African Association of Political Science (AAPS), which I served as Secretary-General for about five years in the 1980s, to write a ‘think piece’ on ‘Rethinking African Politics’. The request was not accompanied by any conceptual note telling me what to do, but a verbal communication indicated to me that there was a need to find out where we are today with the study and writing of African politics from the point of departure of those who have studied African politics professionally (i.e. academically) and regard themselves as African political scientists capable of making ‘scientific sense’ of African politics.

The request seemed to me a tall order, and I raised my concern that I might not be the one to do this since I have been more of a day-to-day political practitioner, or ‘politician’ for that matter, since 1990 in terms of electoral politics aimed at capturing state power. This may actually be a very unfortunate identity to carry, noting especially that the fathers of philosophy—like Socrates—did not think much of politicians. This came

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out very clearly in a conversation Socrates had with the priestess in the shrine of Delphi, who opined that there was no one wiser than Socrates in the whole of Athens. Unfortunately, this was at a time when Socrates himself was very disillusioned with his own pursuit of philosophy as scientific inquiry and started doubting his own wisdom. He started inquiring, empirically, whether there were any other classes of people in Athens who claimed to possess wisdom. According to Anthony Kenny’s rendition of this episode, it soon became clear that politicians and poets possessed no genuine expertise at all, and that craftsmen who were genuine experts in a particular area would pretend to a universal wisdom to which they had no claim. Socrates concluded that the oracle was correct in that he alone realised that his own wisdom was worthless (Kenny 2004: 42).

In the 1980s, after having been disillusioned with the failed attempts by the Bretton Woods institutions to revive African economies and

pressurise African governments to respect ‘good governance’, African social scientists started a serious discourse for an alternative Africa, later captured by the African Social Forum under the slogan ‘another Africa is possible’ (Baxter 2002), or what Samir Amin called ‘a genuinely African political economy’ (Lawrence 2018). African institutions of research and critical Social Science reflections were founded, from Dakar in Senegal to Harare in Zimbabwe and Addis Ababa in Ethiopia. Conferences were held focusing on the African condition, discussed largely within the conceptual framework that Samir Amin had laid, not to mimic him *ad nauseam*, but to seek to unmask the African condition without the prevailing theories and assumptions that behavioural and anthropological scholarship had handed down to us.

Intellectuals, civil society organisers and leaders of social movements discussed and published together in journals founded by the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) based in Dakar, the Southern Africa Political Economy Series (SAPES) in Harare and the Organization of Social Science Research in East Africa (OSSREA), in Addis Ababa. This renaissance of radical Social Science discourse

and praxis produced various individuals who, in their different political settings, joined political movements and parties to struggle for the coming into being of this alternative Africa, during the last two decades of the twentieth century. I was one such individual.

Unlike Socrates, when I left active academics and research to join politics, I had not come to the conclusion that my own wisdom was worthless, but I realised that I would make better use of this wisdom were I to engage more practically in what we started calling ‘the Second Liberation Struggle in Kenya’. After all, this was very much in keeping with Karl Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, which noted that ‘Philosophers have described the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it’ (Engels [1888] 1976).

Very much in keeping as well with Cornel West’s understanding of this ‘thesis’ in its contemporary context in terms of applying Marxist theories to political and social practice (Fuchs 2021), I decided, as a young idealist, that the time had come to go beyond a Marxist critique of African politics to a Marxist attempt to change the situation for a much more humane future for our people<sup>1</sup>—that is, to join the struggle against the post-independence authoritarian regimes in Africa in preference of democratic regimes. Indeed, what distinguishes African politics from 1975 onwards as a period of political defiance is the pronounced involvement of university academics in the daily politics of various African countries, as active party organisers or even as organisers of subversive political movements against authoritarianism and anti-democratic politics (Nyong’o 1987).

## Origins of the breakdown in democratic politics in Africa

In an article published in 1989 in *African Affairs*, I argued that the origin of the breakdown of democratic politics in Kenya, and hence the rise of presidential authoritarianism, needs to be traced to the disintegration of the nationalist coalition that ushered in independence in 1963. This could apply to many African countries in various ways. In Kenya, the breakdown occurred in the period 1963 to 1966, and the country has not recovered since (Nyong’o: 1989). My academic interest in authoritarian presidential regimes has persisted, and I do believe that the instability, the fragility, the continuous fractioning and the high tendency towards personalising the leadership of political parties is not simply the outcome, or function, of tribal politics as is popularly narrated (I would hesitate to call it ‘explained’). It is more a function of the culture of authoritarian presidential politics that easily survives by weakening political elites so as to institutionalise that authoritarian hegemony. Presidential authoritarianism is antithetical to the institutionalisation of political party politics. Are political parties necessary/essential to the building of a democratic political culture in Africa? Can political parties survive in predominantly authoritarian regimes, particularly of the presidential type, in Africa?

My recent book, *Presidential or Parliamentary Democracy in Kenya? Choices to be Made* (Nyong’o 2019), is a collection of essays I published over time in Kenyan newspapers on this very issue. Faced with a national debate aimed at reviewing our 2010 Constitution, so as to reinforce a democratic political culture, poli-

tics of inclusivity and, in short, the nurturing of what Thandika Mkandawire appropriately called a national, democratic and developmental state (Mkandawire 2001), I held the view that the thesis he advanced needs to inform Africa’s political praxis in democratic governance, and that this cannot leave out the role of political parties in building any modern democracy, notwithstanding historical, cultural and regional differences. I will advance this thesis in this essay much later.

Suffice to say, however, that for quite a long period after independence, political parties in Africa dominated Political Science research. After all, nationalists who were captains of the independent state rode to power on the back of nationalist political parties. The majority of Political Science literature published in the 1960s and 1970s concentrated on two issues: political parties and public administration; and armies, military coups and the politics of insurrection as military rule and palace coups became the order of the day in Africa (Nyong’o 2002).

## Democratisation and the re-emergence of multi-party politics

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 changed Western approaches to African politics and the concerns of African social scientists studying our own African reality. By that time, a good number of African intellectuals had moved into active politics, and they remained there, some even becoming heads of state, such as Amos Sawyer in Liberia (1990–1994). With tremendous Western political and donor interest in promoting and defending democracy and good gover-

nance in Africa, public scholarly discourse seemed to move towards focusing on good governance rather than on democracy as such. At times, the formulation of the problematique was nuanced as 'democratic good governance', without necessarily distinguishing clearly between the three: good governance, democratic governance and democratic good governance.

Why was this 'conceptual conundrum' so prevalent? Quite often it was due to the way the donors defined or 'conceptualised' conditions for foreign aid or the types of Social Science research they were ready to fund. Likewise, support for political parties by Western foundations, or 'institutes of democracy', very often emphasised their aim as 'the promotion of good governance' (as defined by them) and not necessarily as building democracy and democratic political systems.

The Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), however, sought to depart from this donor/foreign-aid driven agenda for Social Science research, problem formulation and prescription of the political 'what is to be done in Africa'. Hence the shift in focus that I referred to earlier, of Thandika Mkandawire, long-time Executive Secretary of the institution. And that brings us to why studying, thinking about and writing on African politics and African political developments needs to continue focusing not only on democracy and democratisation in the African context, but also on the principal agents for this democracy and democratisation: social movements, political parties and the state.

## The thesis

My thesis is very simple. In order to build democracy in Africa, we need political parties that believe in democracy 'in and of itself' as Mkandawire once said (Mkandawire 1988),<sup>2</sup> and in organising citizens politically to capture state power so as to promote social, economic, political and cultural relations for the greater good of society, quite often couched in terms of democracy, freedom, equity, fairness, social justice and so on. The opposite of these values constitutes what amounts to bad governance, oppression, dictatorship and so on. The processes through which people are persuaded to bestow political or state power on political parties in order to pursue these values are democratic elections.

There has always been contention regarding the extent to which elections are or can be democratic in diverse African countries, and even if they were, what measures or indicators would be acceptable as evidence of a democratic election or democratic electoral outcomes. One simple test I have often advocated is that an electoral outcome can be judged as democratic when the winner(s) celebrate(s) victory and the loser(s) accept(s) the outcome as legitimate, in accordance to certain constitutional principles or 'rules of the game', freely consented to before the actual electoral contest.

Modern democracies are largely constitutionally governed. In other words, they are founded on Constitutions that are accepted by the majority of the people through some kind of plebiscite, referendum or convention (see, for example, Sahle 2017). To have a democratic process of producing

a democratic government, people (the citizens) must first and foremost struggle over the rules of the game (the Constitution) and accept them either by consensus or through yet another preamble of consensus (through a free and fair vote, or some 'acceptable' choice-making mechanism) that the majority preference takes precedence over the minority dissent.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Constitutions and Constitution-making became a major arena of political struggle in Africa for building democracy. Overnight, political parties were crafted to discuss Constitutions, agree on them or get them imposed on society by some constellation of politicians, and then form governments through democratic elections in which the party or parties with the majority of votes would win.

## The majoritarian principle does not always lead to Canaan: Quite often to Nineveh!

But the majoritarian principle in establishing what is assumed to be democratic governments started being put to the test even as early as the making of the US Constitution in the latter quarter of the eighteenth century. James Madison was sceptical about the majoritarian principle when he pointed out the discrepancy between the assumptions that majority parties in government would serve the public good and their tendency to get consumed in factional fights with little regard to the public good. In Federalist Paper No. 10, Madison wrote the following:

Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private

faith, and of public and personal liberty, that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules, or the rights of the minor party, but the superior force of an interested and overwhelming majority. (Madison 1987; Anyang' Nyong'o 2015).

Madison forgot to add that the power of the 'overwhelming majority' can, in certain cases, actually be usurped by an authoritarian presidency. Had Madison lived during the time of Donald Trump, he most likely would have added this particular phenomenon to his observation. We in Africa have had plenty of such usurpations. From Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe (1980–2017) to Gnassingbe Ayadema of Togo (1967–2005), the list is long.

Hence, notwithstanding many well-written Constitutions in Africa—Kenya's 2010 Constitution being one of them—periodic elections seem not to produce legitimate or stable governments. This is a trend that should not be moaned about, let alone ignored, but properly researched so as to understand its genesis as well as evolution in order to chart some durable path towards the consolidation and institutionalisation of the national democratic and developmental states in Africa.

### **The centrality of political parties**

Despite their disappointing records, weaknesses as institutions, deficiencies in values and goals and the tendency towards what Ali Mazrui called 'the politics of hero worship' (Mazrui 1967), political parties will continue to play a central role in the process of democratisation in Af-

rica, in the role of the state in this process, as well as in development. The myth that development can be left to the so-called private sector is, by its very nature, a myth. The private sector itself needs the state to superintend the rules of the game of succeeding in private sectoring!

Vicky Randall and Lars Svasand (2001), and Giovanni M. Carbone (2007), have proposed useful themes of research that could cover key issues so as to understand the dynamics of African political parties, their weaknesses and potentialities, in promoting and consolidating democracy. Whatever the problems we have with 'the political party' as a key player in the political process in Africa, the party is an entity and a key actor in electoral politics that we can hardly do away with if we are to speak about achieving national democratic and developmental states in Africa today.

But there is a dilemma here. We also observe that very often parties are simply creatures that appear at elections and then disappear, while so-called individual strong men stride the political stage like some colossus. What are given as the background weaknesses of African political parties should not be taken at face value—meaning that there is something missing in Africa as a prerequisite to democratic politics. And this thing is civil society. In other words, a society where economic and social relations are so advanced as a result of capitalist development that the very substance of politics is the struggle of such individuals within their economic categories or social classes. But the question is: must we wait for capitalism to develop before we experience democracy? Not really. Things have never happened like that in history anyway. So we come back to dealing with our reality as it is and to consciously building

national democratic and development states with the raw material that we have.

We have people still identifying themselves as men and women, young and old, this or that ethnic community, urban and rural dwellers, elites and masses, the educated and the not so educated, the rich and the poor, majorities and minorities, immigrants and non-immigrants, black, white and other coloured peoples as well. These are the interest groups affected by the authoritative allocation of values—the power that the state guards for itself jealously—that democratic politics will of necessity be preoccupied with when these groups come to the fore in a democratic polity. So we cannot really ignore David Easton's *Systems Analysis of Political Life* (Easton: 1965) if we are to analyse the role that political parties play in building and consolidating democracy in Africa.

If indeed these groups are the concrete people, and concrete identities, whose interests matter in politics, how do political parties give them political space democratically? Even if we were to categorise them as social classes, what then are these classes and how do they struggle in politics? When this question is ignored and political power is used to allocate values in society irrespective of these interests, conflicts follow, political instability becomes rampant and we speak of the failure of the democratic experiment in Africa. It is not the failure of the so-called experiment. It is our failure as the potential agents of building democracy from within, because we understand it. The essential enemy is within us. Those who understand but stand by in the arena of politics are partly the cause of this so-called failure of democracy, not its victims.

As Edmund Burke once observed, ‘the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing about it’.<sup>3</sup> And in his essay, *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontent* (1770),<sup>4</sup> Burke went on to argue for the importance of good men associating with one another and ‘concerting’ in their thoughts and actions, especially when faced with a dangerous situation in politics or business. Hence the importance of political parties in building and sustaining democratic polities. ‘Whilst men are linked together, they easily and speedily communicate the alarm of any design. They are enabled to fathom it with common counsel, and to oppose it with united strength. Whereas when they lie dispersed, without concert, order or discipline, communication is uncertain, counsel difficult, and resistance impracticable.’

## Conclusion

Burke’s essay partly quoted above is perhaps the most powerful argument advanced in English political theory as bourgeois political parties were beginning to emerge in England. It is indeed very much akin to Lenin’s argument in his political pamphlet *What is to Be Done? Burning Questions of our Movement* (1902), where he argued that the working class in Russia was not going to be able to become political, i.e. promote, achieve and defend their rights simply by fighting economic battles with their employers over wages, working hours and the like. What mattered was to be masters of that instrument that determines and regulates these wages and creates the environment for so-called ‘dispute resolution’. And that instrument was the state.

Without dwelling too much on Lenin’s theory of the state, or on revolution for that matter, it is im-

portant to note that almost all African nationalist political parties were Leninist in many respects. Kwame Nkrumah’s ‘Seek ye first the political kingdom and all these things shall be added unto you’ was very much a Leninist dictum. It was not therefore that most nationalist African political parties, once they achieved state power after independence, became highly centrist, advocating the one-party state à la Lenin. It took Julius Nyerere almost all his life in politics to realise that the one-party state was antithetical to democratic politics.

But after three decades of the second epoch of multi-party politics in Africa, there is a need for African political scientists to ‘take time off’, examine, reflect on and analyse where we have come from, where we might be going and what we have achieved so far in terms of laying the foundation for, and perhaps building, the national democratic and developmental state that Thandika Mkandawire wrote about so extensively as the more preferable alternative for Africa.

A chorus of how bad things are in Africa will not help much. We need to remember Marx’s Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach I quoted earlier. Nor should we sing ten Hail Marys to Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz for cynically telling the world, with some tinge of racial paternalism, that ‘Africa Works’ even though pre-capitalist socioeconomic relations unproductively lead to the misuse and misallocation of resources—local and imported—for development. According to these two gentlemen, this is a version of African development that needs to be recognised in its own right (Chabal and Daloz 1999). ‘It is an illusion,’ the authors contend, ‘to believe that civil society, opposition parties, or exhortations about better gover-

nance can undermine the viability of neopatrimonialism. As a system of maintaining power, however antithetical to the public interest, neopatrimonialism works.’ So, according to these two gentlemen, Africa works and implicitly should be left to get on with it.

At least the two authors should have read Edmund Burke to realise that ‘what is’ is not always ‘what ought to be’. Granted that neopatrimonialism is a viable interpretation or observation of the politics of ‘what is’ that the two observed about Africa. But this is not necessarily coterminous with ‘what ought to be’, which is the material of which political or class struggle is made of regarding the end to which this neopatrimonial state power is used.

As simple African men and women, and ‘in the context of our time’ as Amilcar Cabral put it, we should always remember that our people are not fighting for ideas, for the things in anyone’s head. They are fighting to win material benefits, to live better and in peace, to see their lives go forward, to guarantee the future of their children...’. Were we to follow Chabal and Daloz, being content that ‘Africa works’ today, I am a thousand times certain that we would disappoint our people as African political scientists.

Amilcar Cabral goes on to add: ‘Hide nothing from the masses of our people. Tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories’ (Cabral 1969). This, indeed, is what our task is as political scientists studying the African condition today and advocating certain changes in the context of our time that will help our people live better in national, democratic and developmental states in Africa.

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## Notes

1. For an analysis and interpretation of Cornel West's writing and thinking on philosophy, Marxism and humanism, see Christian Fuchs, 2021, Cornel West and Marxist Humanism, *Critical Sociology*.
2. Refer to the 'CODESRIADebate', which I ignited with my 1988 article on Political Instability and the Prospects for Democracy in Africa, *Africa Development*, Vol. 13, No. 1, pp. 71-86. See Thandika Mkandawire's reply, Comments on Democracy and Political Instability, in *Africa Development*, Vol. 13, No. 3.
3. Edmund Burke, in a letter addressed to Thomas Mercer.
4. See 1999, *Select Works of Edmund Burke*, Vol. 1, Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, p. 146.