

William Lume

Post-conflict reconstruction: The challenges of democracy in Africa

Contemporary discourse on democracy in Africa is largely focused on disorder, blood letting and systematic violence. According to Southall¹, democracy has been appropriated as goal and tool by Western policy agendas. Despite and whatever view most experienced observers may hold about the inherent weaknesses of democratic practices, it suffices to acknowledge that the challenges to Africa's malfunctioning post-conflict institutions are largely external.

There is great diversity over Africa's territories. In each territory, however, different communities interact and over time have developed culture and traditional values, means of livelihoods and resource exchange. It is in each community that an individual may have to forego some of his or her freedom for a common good within the community and agree upon shared values they have to secure and cherish. Together, relations between communities may form a society with shared values and norms. Pre-colonial rules of political conduct set a tradition and hence the different types of civilisations scattered all over the African continent.

African politics

The sovereignty of a modern African state was largely established through colonial violence and in some cases protracted armed conflict. It was a bitterly contested process with loss of life and property including cultural values and local political traditions. The colonial state in Africa inaugurated since at the 1884 conference in Berlin, became recognised in the international community, though still remained not appreciated by its own citizens. The situation of a colonial state is further complicated particularly by some communities claiming allegiances to neighbouring states. Somalia is a case in point where there exists a strong sense and expression for individual rights, though being without a central state has meant that concessional allowances have only been achieved at clan and often sub-clan level at the expense of the whole nation. Somalia's limited history of post-independence stability was only attained in 1969 under a strong regime. Siad Barre had ambitions to build, through a *coup d'état*, a nation that included encroachment on neighbours' sovereign territory. Once the central power that had held Somalia together collapsed, peripheral regions fell into clan-based nationalism and over time they fragmented even further in the process, affecting neighbouring countries.

¹ R. SOUTHALL, *Democracy in Africa: moving beyond a difficult legacy*, Cape Town 2003.

N. 120 - MARCH 2009

Abstract

Post-conflict democratisation processes in Sub-Saharan Africa imply difficult challenges for the actors involved. The main difficulties stem from the nature of African politics and the post-colonial legacy of African states. The dire economic conditions in which independent African states had to operate make democratic efforts more complicated, given the nature of the electoral processes which are too often based on a winner-takes-all electoral rule that fits European political settings but less so African political frameworks.

The case of Uganda is an interesting example of how post-conflict democratisation often yields unsatisfactory results: in each phase of the post-independence democratisation process, the winner-takes-all setting of Ugandan politics has implied the creation of bitter minorities that have proved to be fertile grounds for subsequent revolts. Post-conflict solutions should thus take into account the issue of inclusion of individuals and communities in the construction of democratic institutions.

William Lume is Director of the Centre for Inter-African Relations (CEFIAR), London.

This compounded a “humpty dumpty” effect, which is challenging any effort to put together a state in a rather troubled regional neighbourhood known for its limited community level of democracy.

Governance, the manner in which a political regime exercises power through the state and the ability to exercise sovereignty over its territory, all depend on the power at its disposal and on the legitimacy conferred upon it by those governed. In the case of African democracies, it is undermined at the local community level by the inability of the state to provide security to individuals’ lives and their properties or values. In those situations where conflict challenges a large proportion of a country’s population, particularly disaffected youth, women and minorities, democracy is even strongly undermined. When the solution to conflicts is all hinged on the technical exercise of tallying votes in a national election, the challenge is such that individuals choose their immediate livelihoods above national interest or democracy.

The colonial state in Africa was externally oriented more towards administration, having supplanted the traditional tribal chiefs along with their instruments of democracy. It was only at independence that elections were held. It is also true that the colonising powers after establishing their rule with more of the administrative side of the state, understandably did not introduce democratic practices in the territories they governed. They relegated the political systems they had replaced to merely that of traditional communal authority exercised through tribal chiefs. Indeed many of them like Spain and Portugal were late entrants

to democracy. Together with the new entrants from Eastern Europe to the European Union they are keen to contribute to election monitoring and quite often through media outlets expressing their own preferences.

Conflict factors of African democracy

The founding fathers of Africa’s independence, many of which were Western educated, may have felt decolonisation to be necessarily a synonymous of democratisation. A rather fast way forward to modernisation, by way of industrialisation. The hitherto “primitive” societies would have economic and social development. This was largely strongman rule by sections of the elite to the exclusion of the general electorate whose only contact with government was that of law and order, primary production and collecting of taxes – all colonial remnants. As commodity prices on the world market collapsed in the 1980s, it was followed by atrophy of the state, social services, legitimacy and economic hardships, a sum of which led to military coups of the 1980-1990s. The decline of the central state contributed to more of a strong regime with concentrated power within itself. No doubt all this was at the expense of democracy, which fuelled widespread civil strife and conflict.

When post independence national economic plans ran into difficulties, absent democracy and a restless urban population led many governments to go cup in hand to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank for bail outs. These undemocratic institutions prescribed conditionalities that

made the state unable to govern and further eroded its legitimacy. Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP) underpinned post-independence social upheavals, violence and atrophy of the state both in coercion and legitimacy; yet in the prevailing chaos the international community insisted on “good governance” even clearly when governments had significantly declined. SAP destroyed society-government relationships and left whole communities vulnerable as victims of violence and the youth easily mobilised for conflict.

In Angola for example, after many years of brutal regional (1974-1987) and civil conflict (1992-2002), one party – UNITA – was obliterated in the battlefield. In September 2008 elections were held in the aftermath of a particularly violent conflict. The war-weary electorate often marginalized in the democratic process gave most votes to the mighty victor: MPLA got 82% and UNITA only 10.5% of the votes cast. In the case of Zimbabwe, the West obsession with a regime and with personalities in its leadership has fed into a vicious cycle that degrades the lives of millions and threatens the whole region. There is defiant intransigence on one hand and obscurantism on the other.

Preparing for elections in circumstances of social and economic inequality stocks up latent violence. The way in which a nation’s resources, livelihoods, political power and economic opportunities are distributed affects a society that is ready to break out into violent political conflict. Besides creating a democracy in their own image or picking regions of their preferred choice, international election reports, though

accountable to funders, are often media led, and are only taken into consideration when newsworthy for Western audiences. These monitoring exercises are rarely for the local electorate, hence the cynicism, corruption and the potential conflict they bring along in the very countries in which international observers attempt to build democracy. Of course there are some limited commonalities of democratic practices among EU members who demand a rigorous “one size fits all” type of democracy for Africa. These “experts” are quick to depart for the next worthy assignments as soon as the results are announced or rioting starts.

The fundamentals of human existence, potential conflict factors as well as democratic practices are all lumped together in faith placed in the basket of holding elections. It is not surprising that Africans often end up voting out of romantic post-conflict euphoria and the wild promises of what any dispensation will deliver, or fear of a violent outcome, which will be largely borne by them. No wonder the electorate often sides with the stronger and not necessarily the best representative, if not even against their own interests or well being. The countries that most illustrate the above scenario are Charles Taylor’s Liberia (1997), Kabila’s DR Congo (2006), Kenya (2007) and Dos Santos’ Angola (2008).

The dynamics of democratic change

In order to build democracy in a conflict affected society, it is crucial to support the resilience of the poor among the electorate, using specialised counselling

provided to individuals traumatised by conflicts. In addition, there should be continuous reconciliation among the diverse communities and mitigation efforts should be put in place geared to individual losers in the pre-election political race. At the national level, state structures should be improved to function in a process that reconciles diverse sections of a country. The existence of Western style “winner-takes-all” elections are not necessarily a panacea of democracy neither is there an exclusive African model. Elections designed to benefit the educated sections of society are fraught with problems for future conflict. This fact though is not necessarily unique to Africa.

National political conflict is often a result of unjust social and economic structures, and of undemocratic processes in a society that excludes a majority of the citizens. Just like democracy, political conflict has many pressure points that have to be addressed. There is a crucial need to identify specific entry points in which to intervene. For example, rebuild physical infrastructure and institutions of the state that are able to provide security to the individual, property and cultural values; administration, judiciary, as well as law and order. All these when implemented together underpin good governance irrespective of which political group wins the elections. In parallel to the above, individuals and communities traumatised from the political violence should be provided with professional counselling. Along with the establishment of democratic practices there should be compensation for loss of livelihoods as well as mitigation on potential losses. In addition, the means of livelihood for the different

communities should be rehabilitated without discrimination.

Later, efforts should be geared to reconcile the different sections of society before embarking upon preparing for national elections. One needs to take stock of the pre-existing political factors before the outbreak of violent conflict and what among them may have brought about hostilities. In the process, it is important to identify the perpetrators of violence and malpractices for due process of law but there should be more interest in supporting the victims. Before meaningful elections can take place, there needs to be a campaign to allay the fear of a new dispensation of a “winner-takes-all” democracy, which may in itself become a precursor to conflict. Potential losers to state largesse can easily join forces with the perennial poor to foment political conflict. Also, neighbouring countries often jostle for influence in each other’s internal affairs. It goes without saying that secure regions enhance democracy within countries, which can continue internally among member states.

Reconstructing post-conflict democracy: the case of Uganda

What forms today the modern country of Uganda was the great iron-based kingdoms of the Great Lakes region of Central Africa, which were affected by migrations from the south and north. Uganda, like most African countries, does not have a clear majority population group, resulting in intermittent conflict at the centre of national politics. Uganda political history has

been fraught with political conflict from the outset starting with religious wars between Protestants supported by Britain and Roman Catholics by France and to a lesser extent Muslims, for the control of the region prior to establishment of colonial rule. In 1903 the British created Uganda from disparate kingdoms and people, and removed all effective power from traditional political structures. The result is that there are over 50 main ethnic groups with different traditional social and political systems and cultures, which in the past enabled local people to participate in decision making in matters relating to their personal lives.

To establish colonial Uganda, Nubians from Sudan were inducted in the country's security services to serve as a coercive force to subdue rebellious local populations. Also introduced were Asians who dominated internal commerce while Europeans controlled the export and import trade. The administration and economy were supplemented with a railway line through Kenya, used to transport primary commodities for export in return for consumer goods. This uneven development created a long lasting schism between the north, occupied by Nilotic people and the Bantu in the south.

Representative democracy was only introduced when in 1961 elections were held whereby citizens voted their representatives to think and decide for them. The Western educated political elite took over in 1962 thus controlling a largely cash economy based on the export of primary commodities. In a country without a clear majority, political alliances were always constructed along ethnic and

religious lines underpinned by the military arm of government. It was a type of democracy only of the elite that had replaced traditional rule of kings and clan chiefs. With the positions in government, the ruling elite got titles, cars, houses and servants.

The first post-independence government designed a 5 year development plan to modernise and Africanise Uganda through import substitution. In 1966 Dr Milton Obote (1962-1971) drawing on the colonially created army comprised of ethnically related young Nilotic men from the north and Southern Sudan violently exiled the national president and King of Buganda. From that point onwards, political leadership was a strong man rule, concentrated in the new president.

General Idi Amin (1971-1979) with assistance from Britain and Israel overthrew the civilian government and continued with the Africanisation of the national economy, albeit he carried it on in a radical manner that culminated in the rapid exodus of Asian merchants, which in turn brought a wrath of the Western powers in terms of economic sanctions and a hostile media campaign. As the cash economy deteriorated from the sanctions that limited Uganda's access to international financial credit, state infrastructure and institutions of law and order were undermined. Instead, with support from Libya and Saudi Arabia, strong man rule by decree depended on the charisma of the president and underpinned by an ethnically based security services drawn from Southern Sudan and North East of DR Congo. The citizens' ability to sustain livelihoods was greatly undermined. Under these political and

economic circumstances the inter-elite conflict intensified under the military regime. This resulted in the disappearance and murder of a large number of members of the ruling class. In April 1979, General Amin was overthrown through an armed invasion led by Tanzania and a small group of exiles. The period leading to the December 1980 elections that were won by Dr Obote was characterised by widespread cattle rustling, famine and violent inter-elite factionalism.

Milton Obote (1980-85), inherited a cash economy that had deteriorated from the collapse of the international market for primary commodities, a weakened central state and a protracted guerrilla war. This period was marked by widespread loss of lives by entire communities particularly in central and northwest Uganda in ethnically based reprisals. He was overthrown in July 1985 by the military led by General Tito Okello.

In 1981 Yoweri Museveni, a graduate from the University of Dar-as-Salaam in possession of classical guerrilla strategies honed in Mozambique under FRELIMO, had set up the National Resistance Army (NRA) and its political wing the NRM claiming the elections that put Obote in power had been rigged. With support from Libya and later Tanzania, he mobilised the rural youth from the south, mainly central and western Uganda during a five-year bush guerrilla war. Villagers were encouraged to elect their own leaders and run their own affairs. The military Junta was overthrown in January 1986, in a political situation that shifted the coercive arm of the state and hence national politics in favour of the Bantu south. This largely

left the majority with livelihood-based grievances that were viewed from a political perspective.

The "winner-takes-all" politics of Uganda, a traumatised population and particularly brutal conflict without well articulated political points has resulted into the northern population groups especially the Acholi to feel bitter and marginalised. Situated at the periphery of the central state they have since 1986 lived under war conditions. For long periods rural based rebellions at various times led by Lakwena or Kony, have applied quite brutal methods in the bid to overthrow the government. In sum, the NRM government promulgated non-party presidential and legislative elections, brought about relative political stability and economic growth sometimes of up to 7% per annum. According to Omar Kalinge-Nnyago², Museveni's Uganda has been a country under a "military control and civilian participation" model of public administration. In this model, when the military takes over government, it often keeps a degree of civilian participation for practical or symbolic reasons, or for both. To mask the fact that the military is really pulling the strings behind the scenes, civilian leaders may be put at the head of government. In the same period that the NRM has been in power, there have been military incursions emanating from Uganda into neighbouring countries namely: Rwanda, DR Congo and Sudan. There has also been military support for groups from

these countries posed to overthrow Museveni from power.

Post-conflict reconstruction and way forward

In order to build post-conflict democracy in Africa, positive interventions have to be focused on the individual within the local community, the person that holds a single ballot at the elections. This effort should be followed by nationwide reconciliation between communities and encourage countries in the region to practice grassroots democracy that involves their citizens in the decision making process. These efforts should run in parallel with the reconstruction of infrastructure of the state so that there are functional instruments with which to govern. The state comprising of the two arms, one for coercion and the other largely for building legitimacy through the provision of social welfare are combined in the interest of its citizens and territorial sovereignty. Governance without security or elections without social justice is a travesty of democracy. Africans too should also be availed with ample access to Western and other democracies and quite importantly to learn lessons in the "do not dos" in democracy.

La ricerca ISPI analizza le dinamiche politiche, strategiche ed economiche del sistema internazionale con il duplice obiettivo di informare e di orientare le scelte di policy.

I risultati della ricerca vengono divulgati attraverso pubblicazioni ed eventi, focalizzati su tematiche di particolare interesse per l'Italia e le sue relazioni internazionali e articolati in:

- ✓ Programma Africa
- ✓ Programma Caucaso e Asia Centrale
- ✓ Programma Europa
- ✓ Programma Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente
- ✓ Programma Russia e Vicini Orientali
- ✓ Programma Sicurezza e Studi Strategici
- ✓ Progetto Argentina
- ✓ Progetto Asia Meridionale
- ✓ Progetto Diritti Umani
- ✓ Progetto Disarmo
- ✓ Progetto Emergenze e Affari Umanitari
- ✓ Progetto Internazionalizzazione della Pubblica Amministrazione

ISPI
 Palazzo Clerici
 Via Clerici, 5
 I - 20121 Milano
www.ispionline.it

Per informazioni:
ispi.policybrief@ispionline.it
ispi.policybrief1@ispionline.it

© ISPI 2009

² O.D. KALINGE-NNYAGO, *Uganda's soldier politicians*, http://www.opendemocracy.net/democracy-africa/democracy/uganda_military_3472.jsp.