

Kenya: Dictatorship in Prosperity or a Democracy in Poverty?

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Nearly half a century after Africa's political "independence" from Western colonial powers, the continent is still grappling with issues of basic survival like food, shelter, literacy and disease. Manifestly, Africa paints a bleak picture to people both within and outside the continent. The prevailing state of affairs results from a medley of complex parameters including colonial history, neocolonialism and, some would say postmodern colonialism. But key among these factors is poor leadership by African political elites who have relied rather inordinately on Western prescriptions. The latter have come under various packages such as "friendship with the West" during the Cold War, "democratization", "structural adjustment programmes" and "political pluralism". None of these originated from Africans.

Africa has been home to visionless leadership. African elites have continued to pursue parochial class or ethnic interests to the detriment of national development. In this, they have had the connivance of Western experts to economically disempower their own people. Through Non-Governmental Organizations, donor agencies or government departments, the African people have been duped and exploited for the gain of a few technocrats both in the West and in Africa.

This paper attempts to set a new agenda for Africa; a homegrown agenda that calls to question the priorities that the West has continued to prescribe for Africa. In focus,

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in particular, is the obsession for the last 15 years or so with a mission to "democratize" Africa. Africa is poor, it seems, because it does not uphold democratic ideals. Democracy is presented as a panacea to

Africa's under-development.

Flying in the face of this seemingly seamless rhetoric are some Asian countries that have prospered in relatively authoritarian regimes. Near home in Africa, some less-than-democratic regimes like Uganda and Rwanda are scoring economic points against relatively democratic

countries like Kenya.

Africa's exit from the current predicament requires an array of solutions where democracy or dictatorships are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions. The solutions would generate wealth and catalyze socio-economic mutation irrespective of the regimes. In effect, practical home-grown solutions aided by the developed nations can generate considerable transformation in Africa within a decade or two. Genuine and generous assistance from the West could help in energizing Africa's economic renaissance. The African too, as the designer of the development agenda, has a key and central role to play in this transformation process.

In this transformation process, Africa should turn her eyes to the East and learn from hitherto poor countries that are now raging with prosperity. Examples from countries like mainland China, Malaysia, Hong Kong or India may inspire the African development agenda.

The discussion will be divided into two sections. The first section presents a brief politico-economic history of Kenya that could, but not necessarily, extrapolate into other African countries. The second part weighs the options that could lead to a better Kenya.

A brief messy history of Kenya

Kenya became an official British colony in 1920 after more than 30 years of British "protection". As one would expect in a colony, things were seriously skewed in favor of the colonizers. Local people had no political rights and watched in utter disbelief as their own resources were exploited by foreigners. Poverty, ignorance and diseases ravaged African people as they labored and toiled to pay all manner of taxes to the colonial government.

Though the 1920s sowed the seeds for more ardent resistance to colonialism, more forceful and significant resistance was to come after the Second World War. The participation in the war had emboldened the Africans to try, back home, some of the tricks learned on the battle ground, especially in Burma. The ensuing *Mau Mau* resistance in the 1940s dominated Kenya's politics, and culminated in a declaration of a State of Emergency in 1952 by Sir E. Baring, the then Colonial Governor. Prominent politicians, including Jomo Kenyatta, Achieng Oneko, Paul Ngei, Fred Kubai and Bildad Kaggia were jailed without proper trial. The colonial government was already setting obnoxious legal precedents for independent Kenya. On 12 December 1963, Kenya's flag was mounted on the highest peak of Mt. Kenya, the highest mountain in the country, to mark the end of an ignominious era. Almost 80 years of colonial rule were over.

Neocolonialism

The independence euphoria quickly petered out. The Africans, it appeared, had not been prepared adequately to take over the political and

economic challenges of managing a country. In addition, the concept of a nation was also problematic as most of the African countries had been carved out arbitrarily at the Berlin Conference of 1885. How can communities that had lived independently of each other be amalgamated into one geographical entity called "a country"? Should each ethnic group seek its own state or territory? The issue of nationhood has continued to threaten and undermine the national fabric, occasionally creating interethnic conflicts.

The Cold War between the Soviet Block and the West did little to help matters. Fractious African

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states were now torn between Communism and capitalism. Enticements were many, and Kenyatta's leadership chose Capitalism subtly disguised as 'African Socialism'. The ideological conflict that ensued between Kenyatta and Oginga Odinga (a communist) engendered radical transformations into the leadership style of Kenyatta. With the help of the West, communist groups were crushed and Kenya became henceforth a *de facto* one party state. No more political pluralism. It's uncanny how the same West was to clamor for political pluralism in Kenya after the implosion of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

Kenya's friendship with the West was paying off handsome dividends, though. The US and Britain were offering scholarships for young Africans to pursue studies abroad in the 1960s. Once trained, the elites came back to occupy white collar jobs - thanks to the Africanization programme of replacing Whites with Africans in the civil service, military, etc. Kenya was now fully run by Western-trained elite. The new elite class had its ears pricked up ready to receive further instructions from the former colonial but now "benefactive" masters.

Surprisingly, Kenya did relatively well economically in the first 10 or so years. She had multiplied her productivity ten-fold under the authoritarian leadership of Jomo Kenyatta. Sadly, the gains were to be mitigated by the oil crisis of 1973 that saw a rapid rise in commodity prices.

The next 5 years were less glamorous. The after-effects of the oil crisis coupled with Kenyatta's stranglehold on Kenyan politics curtailed democracy considerably. His leadership was concentrated on maintaining political power while the economy was no longer a major concern. This mindset has since become the mantra of most African leaders: maintain political power at all cost.

Moi's ascendancy to power in 1978 would have galvanized new energies and given the country the much-needed prosperity, which had been on decline from the mid-1970s. But this was never to be. Keen on consolidating his political power more than anything else, Moi ruled the country undemocratically for 24 years. Worse still, the country became much poorer under his reign.

But everything cannot be blamed on Moi. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank had prescribed austere economic and fiscal measures that harmed the country considerably. These included cost-sharing measures, massive reduction in the size of the civil service and the abolition of student stipends at national universities.

The argument here is that whereas both Kenyatta and Moi, may have shared some aspects of authoritarianism, the former had ushered in enviable economic growth in the first decade while the latter had plunged the country into utter poverty during his reign. Authoritarianism does not necessarily hinder economic growth and prosperity.

Moi's iron rule is more manifest in the period 1982-1992. His repressive government distinguished itself by economic underdevelopment, witch-hunting and political harassment of persons with divergent views. Many Kenyans fled the country for political and economic asylum in the West, notably in US, Canada and Norway. During the same period, the Bretton Wood institutions prescribed the infamous Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) as a panacea to Kenya's economic malaise. Top on the list of measures to be adopted were cost-sharing of service provision to citizens and the reduction in the size of the civil service, mostly through retrenchment of the workers. Moi sulked and the IMF/World Bank suspended financial assistance. Finally, he had to succumb but the country continued to perform extremely badly. Poverty was forever on the increase. Clearly, the IMF measures were not successful.

The 1991-2002 period was characterized by a new 'gospel' from the West. From 'SAPs', he mantra quickly changed "democratization" for the African continent. The West made it abundantly clear to Moi that there would be no financial assistance without democratization. Popular demand and mass demonstrations convinced Moi that the time for a monolithic rule was over. He accepted political pluralism and Kenya had the first multiparty elections in 1992. Claims of rigging were made but Moi was re-elected. This would be repeated in the 1997 elections. For this period, it was not clear, despite the nods from the election observers, that the elections had been free and fair. But what could not be doubted was Kenya's transition to a multiparty democracy.

Moi's rule came to an end in 2002 when his party lost to the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) under Mwai Kibaki. Moi had not contested in the election since he was retired but he had appointed an heir, Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Jomo Kenyatta. This time round, the opposition coalition won with a landslide majority. Real democracy had finally come to Kenya. There were no serious claims of rigging. The people had expressed themselves and there had been no stealing of votes. Hopes were high that the new leader would place the country on a fast-track to deliver the country from ignorance, disease and poverty. Forty years after independence, Kenya was still lagging behind in the fight against the three ills.

The Kibaki regime has not distanced itself much from the former regime. Indeed, a good number of its members were drawn from the former regime. In this musical chairs melodrama, the citizens watched helplessly as their new 'messiah' wined and dined with what they considered their number one enemies. Finally, as it is said, in politics there are no permanent enemies or friends, only permanent interests.

Riddled with corruption and inept leadership, the NARC government has been unable to deliver on its promises. To be fair, there's now free primary education and more than one million additional children now attend school. This is a welcome policy decision as it will help rid the country of ignorance. But is the programme viable? It should be remembered that Moi had also initiated a school milk programme for all children in primary schools. The programme was not sustainable. It was shameless political expediency.

Quite clearly, it seems unlikely that the current government can usher the much-hoped economic prosperity to Kenyans. One may therefore be tempted to pose the question of what is the problem with Kenya? Why has the country become poorer and more hopeless in the last 25 years or so? Why are the Asians performing much better than us?

Explaining under-development

In my view, Kenya's current economic imbroglio can be explained by several factors. But top on the list are poor African leadership and interference by Western powers. Since the two factors are intertwined, let us examine them in the same breath.

Poor African leadership and collusion with the West

Upon attaining independence, African countries have to face the challenges of the Cold War between the West and the Communists. Kenya, although tilted toward the US and Britain, professed itself to be non-aligned. The benefits, in form of aid, followed, probably explaining the rapid growth of Kenya in the 1960s. But more importantly is the solid leadership of Kenyatta. His vision and commitment to fight poverty, disease and ignorance cannot be doubted. Kenyanization of the civil service created many employment opportunities to Africans, although the policy was demonized by the West.

With the deterioration in the quality of Kenyatta's leadership from the late 1960s and up to mid 1970s, the country's growth snarled up, and the oil crisis did little to help matters. Poverty started to bite hard as rural-urban migration intensified. Many people moved to the cities in search of jobs. Politically, people felt that democracy could usher in more progress. But any move to democratize was repressed violently. Some politicians and academics even proposed communism as a cure to Kenya's woes. But Kenyatta, with a little help from the West, stamped out the fire.

Moi's regime coincided with a change in the mantra from the West.

Democracy was now the buzzword and being held up as the magic elixir that would see Kenya through its problems. The prescriptions were actually orders because once the agenda is set in a Western capital, African governments are required to comply or else financial aid would be withheld.

The mass pro-democracy protests in the 1980s, which reached their highest points in the 1990s were informed by a certain notion that democracy would bring prosperity to the people of Kenya. The West made it clear that Kenya was poor due to lack of democracy. In this logic then, democracy once achieved, would deliver the country from the economic doldrums.

But ten years or so now into a democracy, Kenya is still very poor. The challenges of 1963 still stare us in the face. The current leadership can boast of delivering more democracy to Kenyans but no prosperity.

Within three years of the NARC rule, the country is steeped into massive corruption and economic mismanagement. The new Turks are employing the same thieving tendencies of the former two regimes. Nothing is new.

Better leadership elsewhere?

But all is not gloom and despair in the East African region. Uganda, which has not held free and fair elections for more than a decade, is prospering. Uncannily, the West has diverted its attention from Kenya to Uganda, which now appears to be more strategic to her interests. The country has been enjoying unqualified support from the US in the last ten years, despite the absence of any semblance of democracy in the country. Here we have a contradiction in policy where the West supports a relatively authoritarian regime. Kenyans are now sending their children to study in Uganda as it is stable and prospering. The quality of University education also seems better than in Kenya. It appears Museveni, the Ugandan President, has a clear agenda for his country: Move forward. Democracy is obviously not top on his agenda.

How about Malaysia and Singapore in Asia? These countries had a comparable GDP with African states in the late 1950s. But they have continued to prosper economically. Funnily enough, the citizens of these countries are not very familiar with the term democracy. The issue here, it seems, is good leadership, not democracy. These countries have been led by politicians whose agenda was to bring progress and wealth to their countries. Are these the *benign dictators* that Africa has lacked? Africa, with a few exceptions, seems to have had visionless dictators.

In sum, it will seem that the key to progress in Africa is good leadership, whether in a democracy or in an authoritarian context. But good leadership is not enough. Africa also needs foreign assistance to achieve her development goals.

Genuine support from development partners

There is no doubting the role that foreign aid could play to liberate Africa from the vicious cycle of poverty. But such **aid should be genuine and generous**. Current figures indicate that most of the foreign aid is consumed by the donor country through indecent salaries and overheads for its own staff. It is not uncommon to find development agents driving the latest all-terrain vehicles, living in leafy neighbourhoods and earning hundreds of thousands of dollars all in the name of poverty-reduction strategies for Africa. Only a fraction of the aid trickles down to the intended use. This is not what Africa needs.

In addition, aid should not be tied to democratization or any ideology. Rather it should seek to resolve problems as they are presented by African leaders. The point here is that the West should give Africans a chance to determine how best their problems can be solved. Prescriptions can only harm the already fragile continent.

Accusations of corruption and lack of democracy should not be used to deny any part of the continent a much-needed economic revival. Poverty could prove to be a more worrisome problem than terrorism in the long run as Jeffrey D. Sachs, special advisor to Kofi Annan, UN chief, notes in the *Time* magazine of March 14, 2005. A poor and fragile Africa could pose a major threat to world peace. It is therefore urgent that the developed nations galvanize foreign aid, cancel debts, enhance trade with Africa in a bid to prepare Africa's exit from poverty. Sachs convincingly demonstrates that poverty could be eradicated from the developing world with more compassion and deliberate efforts by both Africa and the developed world. In this revival, democracy is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition.

Globalization and unfair trade practices

Fair trade practices, use of local knowledge and technology transfer will all contribute to generating wealth for African countries. These ingredients have not accompanied the clamor for democracy for Africa and yet they could be as important as or even more important than free speech or free press in liberating Africa from the shackle of poverty.

The wrangles at the World Trade Organization between the developed and developing nations sum up the atmosphere that stifles Africa's economic revival. If the developed nations engage in sincere and healthy trade with Africa, then economic miracles can be realized sooner than later. This is what ails Africa more than lack of democracy. African leaders should raise their voice and demand fair trade practices with all their development partners.

Asian models

When Kenya was blacklisted after the 9/11 event by the US administration as a dangerous destination for Western tourists, there was a sudden economic panic. Although the negative effects on the economy

were short-lived, they were nonetheless significant. The numbers of tourists dropped considerably and many hotels had to close down, leading to many job losses.

The need to seek or reinforce development partnerships with the East cannot be over-emphasized. There is a crying need to scale up trading links with China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, etc as alternative development partners. Kenya may learn more from countries that were formerly poor but now prosperous rather than depending inordinately on lessons from the victors of World War II. For instance, it might be instructive to learn how South Korea evolved from an agrarian to a technology-driven country; the manner in which Hong Kong has managed to virtually extirpate corruption in high places could provide insights into curbing the menace in Kenya. What are the Malaysians doing that Africans can't do? Why is India now slowly exiting the poverty cycle? In sum, how is East and South East Asia managing to prosper in modern times as Africa is bathed in abject poverty?

The models from the East and West could help enrich locally-developed development models, but they should not supplant the latter. Africans are not the first to be poor, others have been and they have come out of it recently. We need to learn from them. Fast.

Conclusion

There is no doubt democracy is a desirable form of government and authoritarianism is antithetical to it. However, it is naïve to assume that economic growth and prosperity is necessarily a derivative of democracy. With the few examples presented above, it appears that authoritarianism does not necessarily negate prosperity as we saw in Kenya under Kenyatta, and in Malaysia and Singapore.

The answer lies in strong African leadership that is geared toward wealth generation. If Africa's renaissance is possible, then probably this is the avenue to choose. If it can be achieved through a democracy so be it. If authoritarianism can deliver the goodies so be it. Africa is desperate for food, water, energy, shelter, education and good health. These are the basic needs upon which our renaissance should be predicated. Democracy or lack of it is irrelevant in addressing these canonical needs. People cannot eat democracy. Slogans like "expanding freedom to Africa" by George W. Bush, might be more relevant and cogent if reformulated as "expanding wealth to Africa".

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