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Social Depoliticization, Authoritarian Power, and Lack of Development in African States

The nature of depoliticization

Claude Ake¹ was interested in how the depoliticization of African societies has led to their existing in a state of permanent crisis, and, in particular, to the impossibility of their development. He understood depoliticization as a situation where the right to possess a political sphere of life is withheld from most members of the state and, at the same time, politics is monopolized by those in power. He showed the error of seeing the African crisis primarily as an economic crisis, and emphasized that in the literature concerning African problems it was mistakenly assumed that African political elites were interested in development. In his opinion, the basic dimension of the African crisis is a political dimension, because development is definitely not in the interest of the authoritarian leaders of African states. He asks: “why should an African leader [...] embark on a course of social transformation just because it is good for his country if it is bad for his own survival?”² He pointed out the contradiction in Africa between the interests of persons in power and development, which by definition should be realized in the interests of the entire society.

He believed that the sources of economic crisis lay in political crisis, which he linked with the depoliticization of society and economic processes. In his opinion, depoliticization paradoxically produces, in African states, an increased interest in political affairs at the cost of attention paid to economic problems. In such conditions, it is not that – as the term “depoliticization” might suggest – politics

¹ Claude Ake (1939–1996), outstanding Nigerian political thinker and professor of political science at several universities (at Yale, in Nairobi, Dar es-Salaam, and Port Harcourt), head of the renowned centre for African research, the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) in Dakar, and the founder and director of the Center for Advanced Social Science (CASS) in Port Harcourt. He was an advocate of building democracy in Nigeria and published numerous works on a broad range of issues related to democratization and development in Africa. The questions he considered in his works are still topical, and his views and analyses are quoted with increasing frequency, in the West as well. See Kelly Harris, “Still Relevant: Claude Ake’s Challenge to Mainstream Discourse on African Politics and Development”, *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 2, Fall 2005, 73–88, where the author discusses Ake’s work.

² Claude Ake, “How Politics Underdevelops Africa”, in: *The Challenge of African Economic Recovery and Development*, Adebayo Adedeji, Owodunni Teriba and Patrick Bugembe (eds.), London: Frank Cass, 1991, p. 319.

ceases to have meaning, rather politics becomes the most important matter in the state. He writes: “when we banish politics in a society ridden with contradictions, it comes back with a vengeance and undermines everything including peace and progress and the security of those who seek to banish it”.³ In conditions of depoliticization, the political struggle intensifies, and politics becomes a field of battle.

He distinguished three bases for the depoliticization of African societies: political authoritarianism, the exclusivity of power, and the elevation of apoliticalness to the level of an ideology.

He linked political authoritarianism with the heritage of the colonial authorities, which based themselves on force and did not treat the inhabitants of conquered territories as citizens, but rather destroyed their culture and exploited their resources.⁴

The source of the exclusivity of power should thus be sought, in his opinion, in the struggle of Africans for independence. Towards the end of the colonial period, a fight for full power occurred between the colonial camp and the camp for independence. This struggle was marked by each side’s efforts to use power exclusively for its own interests and to break down the opposing side’s claims to power. In such a state of affairs, as Ake puts it, “politics was practised with the intent of ending politics”.⁵

Apoliticalness raised to the rank of ideology is the effect, in the period of decolonization, of the activities of leaders who, in acquiring power, desired to eliminate any difference of opinion while trying to prove the unity of interests of all members of the national independence movement. In practice, this meant that a new elite strove either to pacify the political opposition or to prevent its formation.⁶

Depoliticized African societies were yet highly heterogeneous in ethno-cultural terms, as well as fragmented in the economic domain, where certain sectors, focused at one time on satisfying the needs of foreign metropolises, did not complement each other in serving the domestic needs of the state. Within the new state, various ethnic groups also had differing political interests, which became progressively more visible as the independent state fulfilled their expectations to a diminishing degree. In a democratic order of things, these differences would have found their reflection in a political life based on the multi-party principle, where they could have been legally articulated and solutions could have been negotiated. Depoliticization, however, tried to dismantle differences by means of political repression. Domination and subjugation have become characteristics of African states. In such conditions, an above-average

³ Ibid., p. 329.

⁴ Cf. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 164, where the author writes about one of the less known aspects of exploitation in British colonies.

⁵ Ake, “How Politics Underdevelops Africa...”, p. 317.

⁶ Ake seeks the source of this state of affairs in the colonial period. See his, “Rethinking African Democracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 2, No. 1, Winter 1991, 32; and his, *The Feasibility of Democracy in Africa*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 2000, p. 164.

interest in politics had to be produced. Some of the oppressed wanted the possibility of deciding about their own affairs, while the authorities desired, above all, to maintain their dominant position.

Some principles of the organization of authoritarian power

The desire of the authorities to continue in power and domination does not harmonize with a desire for development. Development has become a threat to the continuation of authoritarianism. Ake believes that the conditions necessary for the implementation of a development strategy – in fact a huge program for social transformation – are the social legitimation of power, the authorities' view of development as a general undertaking for the common good, transparency of the authorities' actions, and collective engagement on behalf of development. For development to be seen from the objective perspective of social interest requires fundamental changes that strike at the bases of an authoritarian regime's continuation and at its chances of accumulating wealth at the cost of society. In consequence, the activities of many of the authorities of African states that appeared to be interested in development were actually superficial in nature and could not result in real development. The authoritarian power did everything to ensure its further existence at the cost of development.⁷

Part of the strategy for maintaining power has been to fill positions in the state – positions requiring much knowledge or ability – by people of low qualifications.⁸ Ake writes that “here lies the bane of African ministries and parastatals: ignorant and incompetent people used obstructively and wastefully at the very top of our institutions, while competent people are wasted”.⁹ Such a state of affairs leads to the demoralization and frustration of qualified workers.

Another aspect of the problem is the earmarking of resources for non-productive purposes. For instance, development funds are spent where they will not bring any social benefit. Important contracts are signed by people who do not properly understand such documents. Well paying, new positions are created for persons not on the basis of merit but for political purposes. There is a clear contradiction between effort and remuneration.

The authorities' strategy for maintaining power has also led to the militarization of social and political life in African states. In order to have anything to say in the public sphere in Africa, a person must have force at his disposal and be prepared to use it. In consequence, African political organizations are reminiscent of regular armies, prepared

⁷ See Ake, “Rethinking African Democracy...,” p. 35, where the author presents statistics showing the tragic consequences for African economies of the continuation of authoritarianism several decades after independence.

⁸ In the African literature, this problem is analyzed from the perspective of the poor organization and low effectiveness and productiveness of work by Paulin J. Hountondji, “Daily Life in Black Africa: Elements for a Critique”, in: *The Surreptitious Speech: Présence Africaine and the Politics of Otherness 1947–1987*, V.Y. Mudimbe (ed.), Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 345–349.

⁹ Ake, “How Politics Underdevelops Africa...”, p. 319.

to acquire nearly absolute power by means of armed conflict.¹⁰ As Ake writes, “this is in itself an economic problem. In a society in which the political formations are organized as warring armies, differences are too hard, the scope for co-operation too limited; there is too much distrust and life is too raw to nurture commerce and industry”.¹¹

The apogee of the militarization of life in African states is reached in states where the military rules – a situation which has been rationalized both in Africa and outside of it. For instance, some Western economists are of the opinion that given the multi-ethnicity of African states, economic development can be achieved precisely by the introduction of the discipline and efficient organization that should characterize a military government. Regimes of this sort are juxtaposed with corrupt and ineffective civilian governments. However, the consequences of military power in African states have turned out to be catastrophic, in economic terms as well. For Ake this is obvious, as he writes that “once the military assumes power – that is, enters politics – politics captures it and it immediately begins to reflect, on an increasing scale, the social contradictions of the society. Then the same features which discredited the civilian political formations and political regimes begin to assert themselves in the military”.¹² Such a situation must result from the military’s lack of competence in governing. Military officers are not, after all, trained to conduct affairs of state, but rather to provide a state with security from external threats.

Since actions connected with force do lie within the military’s competencies, the militarization of society occurs through the regime’s implementation of a policy of force and fear. Such a situation leads, in Ake’s opinion, to the polarization of members of the state into two camps: those who support the stern powers-that-be and those who are opposed to them.¹³ The military is not in a position to mobilize people toward mutual accord, which would seem to be a prerequisite for development.

Lack of development

In Ake’s opinion, development cannot occur if it is not participatory in nature, that is, if it is not performed by the people themselves and in their interest.¹⁴ Ake defines development as a process by which people create and change themselves and their living conditions in order to achieve a higher level of civilization, in accordance with their own choices and values.¹⁵ At the same time, he shows that

¹⁰ Cf. the presentation of this problem in Nigeria by Ben Okri, *The Famished Road*, London: Cape, 1991, passim; and Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People*, London: Heinemann, 1966 (and 1988; and London: Penguin, 2001), passim.

¹¹ Ake, “How Politics Underdevelops Africa...”, p. 321.

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ake does not mention that the political consciousness of the majority of Africans is concentrated on the local community. The division thus seems quite simplified.

¹⁴ See Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa*, Washington D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1996, p. 139–159, where the author presents his own vision of the development of Africa (called the “agricultural strategy of development”).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 125.

“where development is not participatory it can only be the development of alienation and domination”.¹⁶ African leaders do not understand the need for development because they live in comfort and from the exploitation of those whom development should affect. The interests of the authorities and of ordinary people are contrary to each other.

Development is not what is desired by international financial institutions or by Western or other concerns operating in Africa. In Ake’s opinion, they represent, like the African authorities,¹⁷ their own sort of prosperous community, knowing neither hunger nor poverty. And it is precisely with such problems that the societies needing development are struggling. Ake thinks that international financial institutions represent a Western viewpoint and in principle are recreating the West’s domination in Africa, while business concerns are interested solely in profit. If the foreign entities create development policies, then the inhabitants of Africa, whom this development should concern, take no part in the discussion about development. In other words, those assumedly speaking in the name of ordinary Africans have other interests than those who are most in need of development. In consequence, Ake says, “there is no relationship between public policies and social needs. The populace are merely the means to the ends of narrow interests; they are not, as they should be, the end and the inspiration of the development process”.¹⁸ The non-participatory development imposed on Africans by foreign entities (in cooperation, sometimes, with authoritarian leaders) can only be implemented by the use of force, which in turn hampers the engagement and mobilization of people. It is a matter, Ake says, of mistaking ideology for reality and form for content.

The authoritarian powers of African states, by monopolizing politics, also try to gain exclusive control of the economy. The point, Ake claims, is that if persons were to manage economic resources independently, they could – if only potentially – threaten the position of those in power. Ake writes in this context that “successful entrepreneurs are watched and harassed for fear that they may become centres of opposition; and this happens even when they do not show signs of political ambitions”.¹⁹ Such a state of affairs certainly does not further development, and is actually unhealthy for economic life. Some entrepreneurs join the camp of the authorities: some out of fear of persecution, others out of ambition. Their interest in politics sometimes leads to their abandoning business in favor of the benefits flowing from participation in power.

A further aspect of political control over economic life in African states is the authorities’ tendency to regulate the economy by enormous amounts of legislation,

¹⁶ Ake, “How Politics Underdevelops Africa...”, p. 322.

¹⁷ See Ake, “Devaluing Democracy”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 3, No. 3, July 1992, 36, where the author concisely relates how African leaders sought justification for their authoritarian rule in the views of Western experts, who considered democracy unnecessary for generating development in Africa.

¹⁸ Ake, “How Politics Underdevelops Africa...”, p. 323.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

which may discourage investment or any sort of economic initiative.²⁰ Excessive economic regulation requires a continual extension of costly bureaucracy. In addition, broad publicly-owned sectors are maintained and often ineffectively managed, which leads to losses.

Ake emphasizes moreover that when politics is monopolized by an authoritarian political class it becomes that class's livelihood. Politics in Africa provides not only power but also far-reaching possibilities for accumulating wealth. One form of abuse of power is the acquisition of fortunes by members of the government, through corruption, for instance. Such corruption varies in character; it is, for example, more or less the norm that state contracts in Africa are acquired by bribes, as are export and import licenses, positions in public institutions, exemptions from various payments, and the avoidance of procedures, duties, quality standards, regulations, etc. Needless to say, all this happens to the detriment of the public interest.

Authoritarianism also has a deleterious effect on developing market economy mechanisms in Africa. Ake thinks that "it is not necessary to generate wealth by acting capitalistically, that is, by rising capital, investing in some productive activity and then profiting from the sale of goods or services arising from this investment".²¹ The corruption of African authoritarian leaders perverts the law of the market and teaches entrepreneurs how, thanks to underhand practices, they can achieve their goals more quickly.²²

The necessary democratization

The cure for the critical condition of the African state is, in Ake's opinion, to have a full democratization of the political processes and to treat development as a general democratic enterprise conducted by Africans.²³ Ake writes in this context that "there is no development in mass demobilization" and "wanton coercion and power without accountability promise only more barbarism".²⁴ He thinks that it is a structural – and not solely procedural – democratization that could strike at the powerful interests of the current authorities and foreign concerns operating in Africa. It would bring the end of the authoritarian regimes and would further the development of civic society and the common good and not, as previously, private advantage. In consequence of democratization processes, holding political office would come to be less profitable. Democratization would force the authorities – who would finally be constituted by and controlled by society – to become more accountable. Under democracy, African economies would also be freed from state control.

²⁰ Cf. Hountondji, "Daily Life in Black Africa...", p. 354–359.

²¹ Ake, "How Politics Underdevelops Africa...", p. 324.

²² Cf. George Carew, "Development Theory and the Promise of Democracy: The Future of Postcolonial African States", *Africa Today*, Vol. 40, 1993, 31–53, where the author presents his viewpoint on this and other relations between authoritarianism and the economy and development.

²³ Cf. Ake, "Rethinking African Democracy...", p. 38–41, where the author speaks critically of the West's role in building democracy in Africa.

²⁴ Ake, "How Politics Underdevelops Africa...", p. 329.

Ake is perfectly aware that realizing the above goals, with the expected consequences of democratization, would meet with resistance from those who have depoliticized African society. But the durability of the authoritarian power elites who once took over politics in Africa is today far from certain, as has been shown by the – unfortunately still not very numerous – cases of African states that have put themselves on the road, it would seem, towards real democratization: Benin, Ghana, Mali, the Republic of South Africa, Senegal, and the Republic of Cape Verde.

Conclusions

The title of Ake's work – "How Politics Underdevelops Africa..." – on which this article is partly based, could suggest that politics has led to the underdevelopment of Africa, while the point is that the harm has been done by certain reprehensible political practices, which Ake defines with the term "depoliticization". This term is the opposite of the idea of "politicization" and refers to rendering African society apolitical. Ake, as a close and long-time observer of African conditions, shows that African autocrats do not know how to conduct politics in any other manner than by excluding the society they govern from political processes. In Ake's opinion, this phenomenon is wholly disadvantageous, particularly in economic terms.

Ake opposes the view that separating politics from economic processes has a positive effect on the economy. The economy, he indicates, cannot get by without politics, because in order for the market to function properly, society must be able to articulate its wants, and also, should the need arise, to regulate the market by state institutions – and this is a political activity. The independence of economics from politics is thus a myth. Indeed, Ake's description of authoritarian powers shows their interest in the economy, but chiefly at the level of directing it or controlling it for their own benefit, and not for the benefit of society.

Ake theorizes that African leaders are not interested in development. The point is not exclusively economic development, although it certainly plays an unusually important role; Ake considers development in a wider sense, that of civilizational development, where a key element is political development, whose highest stage is democracy. Development understood more broadly than in just the sense of economic development thus means strengthening the political position of the population. A higher level of political development carries with it the necessity for greater transparency of the authorities' actions and greater accountability to society. This is contrary to the interests of African leaders, for it would mean that they would lose their monopoly on political decisions and would be limited in their possibilities of enriching themselves at the cost of society.

In order not to allow political development, Ake notes, autocrats must hinder general economic development. If economic development reached the whole society it would make the continuation of the economy in a depoliticized state impossible. General economic development would have a positive impact on the society's level of education. Educated people are harder to keep from participation in politics. Effective action for economic development would, willy-nilly, sooner or later, lead

to the politicization of society. Lack of agreement on economic development constitutes, therefore, part of the autocrats' strategy for remaining in power.

But why not try to reverse the perspective Ake presents? Autocrats might, after all, try to stay in power precisely by generating economic development and, in consequence, by building support for their governments in their societies. We know of cases of enlightened autocrats who have created development that was profitable both for themselves and for the societies they govern. Sharing development with the people could sometimes strengthen the ruler and could also bring the ruler larger benefits. At present, such examples can be seen in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Brunei. Perhaps these are educated and enlightened authorities, with vision, who know in what direction their countries' economic and political transformations should head. The examples of certain contemporary autocrats are very instructive. It could be asked why there are no pro-development autocrats in Equatorial Guinea, in Angola, Gabon, Cameroon or Zimbabwe. Why, as in the case of various non-African autocrats, are the authorities of these states guided by other rules?

Ake thinks there is an immanent contradiction between the interests of the powers-that-be in Africa and states' being opened to participatory development, which would mean that everyone would take part in it and society as a whole would benefit. For African autocrats, development is always risky. Ake would appear to be telling us that African authorities are governed by a primal desire for profit. Those who acquired power quickly understood the benefits that power could bring. In order to increase their gains and ensure their permanency, African leaders aim to appropriate the entirety of the state they govern. Ake shows that African autocrats live in microcosms of greed and hunger for power, where they function, as he puts it, in a state of siege.²⁵ This state of siege is signified by the feeling of insecurity, by fear of losing power, privileges, and material benefits. African leaders are often uneducated and do not possess traditional legitimacy for exercising authority. In addition, each comes from only one of the many ethnic groups in the state.

However, Ake does not link the authorities' siege mentality with the question of multi-ethnicity, and perhaps the basis for the situation should be sought precisely in this domain. It is possible that the authoritarianism of African leaders is furthered above all by the multi-ethnic character of African states. An African leader must fear that the democracy brought by development could not only threaten his position, but could bring rule by another ethnic group, potentially one in competition with, or inimical to, his own people. Development appears, in this perspective, as an even greater threat than the threat of mere material loss. The acquisition of power in the state by the members of a different ethnic group could mean reprisals against the former authorities and lead to destabilization of the state's safe status quo. Autocrats could be seen, in African conditions, as a certain type of stability, as the opposite of – fatal for the population – anarchy. In the name of development or of building

²⁵ See further, Ake and Walusako Mwalilino, "An Interview with Claude Ake", *West Africa Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2000, 11.

democracy it would be easy to bring about dangerous conflicts and the destabilization of a state. In no case does this justify the actions of African autocrats, but it is worth noting that the lack of agreement of African leaders on development could be broader in nature than is indicated by Ake, who avoids the question of the relation between multi-ethnicity and depoliticization.

Ake postulates the necessity of participatory development in African states. He suggests that African development should not tread the path once taken by Western states; Africa should not repeat the West's mistakes, but should draw from them lessons of what to avoid. He points out that instead of deepening the difference between the richest (in Africa, primarily the political elite) and the poorest in a state, development should occur in a more egalitarian manner. He correctly assumes that if development does not have a participatory character, it is the development of domination and alienation. If development were to provide the authorities with even larger profits than they already had, and did not particularly affect the majority of the people in the state, then it would of course strengthen the authorities' domination over the society.

Alienation can be seen as the distancing of the state from the people in the sense that the state becomes an ever greater abstraction for them. This happens when various benefits of the state are monopolized by the political elites. Ake does not say directly that development could be slower and could encompass other priorities than those imposed on Africans from outside. And yet, the very idea of development as a certain type of intellectual construction created outside of Africa might not only lead to alienation, but could become its instrument. When international financial institutions, as Ake says, set forth a single model to be introduced in Africa, and the people on whom this experiment is to be conducted have nothing to say in the matter, it must lead to alienation.²⁶ Alienation comes when Africans are deprived of a voice, and someone makes the decisions for them.

The proposal of participatory development in the social dimension is primarily a call for a more equal distribution of goods, and means that more budget funds must be earmarked for education and health care, so that more people in the state would have access to these advantages.²⁷ Participatory development also has its political dimension – democratization and human rights.²⁸ After all, development strategy requires, as Ake indicates, social consensus, particularly in the matter of the authorities' legitimacy. If development is, in addition, participatory in nature, people must have the possibility of choosing those who govern them.

At the same time, spectacular infrastructure investments are indicators of development, but only of the economic development of the state. The construction

²⁶ See Ake, "Rethinking African Democracy...", p. 36, where the author also discusses how experts on development consider Africans to be the basic stumbling-block to generating development in Africa.

²⁷ Currently, indirectly, measured by the indicators of the Human Development Index.

²⁸ The level of democratization in a state and its members' access to political rights is currently researched by Freedom House.

of highways, of city streets, of airports, hotels or stadiums cannot be encompassed within the framework of the Human Development Index. No one questions the necessity of developing infrastructure in Equatorial Guinea, Angola, or other African states with money acquired, for example, from the export of petroleum. These investments should, of course, be made, but it is not enough to stop there and they should not be treated as priority investments. Civilizational development cannot be measured in the number of kilometers of new roads. Infrastructure must be accompanied by development programs that create new – or strengthen old – areas of the economy. However, it is only a broad availability of schools and hospitals which is the true indicator of a given society's level of development.

The problem is that schools and universities threaten the existence of autocrats to a much greater degree than do roads, and this is why such small sums are allocated for schooling in African states. And it is precisely in this matter that the discordance between the autocrats' continuation in power and development is most clear. Real development occurs when a state cares for the education of those who are to produce this development. An authoritarian system, in contrast to a democratic one, provides very limited possibilities for educated people.²⁹ Those who have the opportunity to gain an education in countries governed in an authoritarian manner become, with time, cogs of the existing system and begin to function according to the authoritarian system's rules, and often, if it is in their interest, they even support the system. Sometimes, however, if they do not see a place for themselves in the authoritarian state, they simply emigrate. Many members of the intellectual elite have no possibility of using their knowledge for the good of society, or they are so poorly paid that they have no benefit from their many years of study. Furthermore, the lack of relation between exertion and reward, as Ake correctly notes, quite frequently has a demoralizing effect.

Ake's thoughts about the connection between, on the one hand, authoritarian powers and the depoliticization of African societies, and, on the other, the lack of development does not exhaust the question of the crisis of the African state. But his opinions are valuable as an African viewpoint, which is not often taken into account.

²⁹ See further Ake and Mwalilino, "An Interview with Claude Ake...", pp. 5, 8, 9, where Ake discusses various aspects of the situation of educated people in authoritarian African states.