

Post-liberal politics in East Africa: the tickbird and the rhino

The tickbird

The opening quotation hints that democratic politics in East Africa, as elsewhere, is about the capacity of the state not only to manage elections, competing parties, and constitutional rules; it is also about delivering 'magic': i.e. jobs, livelihoods, infrastructure, services, and social safety nets. East African experiences suggest that political reforms require material improvements. For genuine democracy, socio-economic 'magic' may be essential. In façade democracies, elections are stage-managed, and media freedoms severely restricted.

Former Tanzanian President Nyerere warned about belief in the magical powers of 'big men'. Leaders use various forms of 'belly politics', sharing resources. But when they fail to deliver, this can also mean their downfall. In his Leadership Code, Nyerere proposed: 'Leaders must set a good example to the rest of the people in their lives and in all their activities'.¹ He continues to explain:

Our policy is to make haste slowly, but it may be hard to sell this to the people. Freedom to many means immediate betterment, as if by magic. We are not magicians. But unless I can meet at least some of these aspirations, my



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Image top: Kenya Election Posters.

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References

*support will wane and my head will roll just as surely as the tickbird follows the rhino.*²

Presidential tricks

In 2006, all East African countries except Uganda stuck to their constitutional provisions and limited the President to no more than two terms in office.³ Prospects for genuine democratic transition looked reasonable. By 2018, just Kenya and Tanzania had stuck to two-term Constitutional provisions. Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi had all seen changes in the Constitution allowing multiple – and even indefinite – Presidential terms.⁴ This situation was worrying, since: ‘imposition of presidential term limits...may be the most important indicator of how entrenched constitutionalism has become... on a continent notorious for...‘presidents-for-life’’.⁵

Already at independence, Amilcar Cabral warned that new regimes used a ‘bag of tricks’ to stay in power: ‘gerontocracy, nepotism, social inferiority of women, rites and practices...incompatible with the rational and national character of the struggle’ for independence.⁶ During the 1990s, of 18 African Presidents who completed two terms in office, only eight stood down voluntarily. Ten changed the rules and stood again, or appointed loyal proxies.⁷

1. Arusha Declaration 5 February 1967.

2. Julius Nyerere “Island of Peace.” Time magazine, 15.12.1961, cited in Mkapa, Benjamin William ‘Leadership for Growth, Development, and Poverty Reduction: An African Viewpoint and Experience’, Chapter 2, pp. 36-37, [World Bank publication](#).

3. Daniel Venconsky (2007) “[Presidential term limits in Africa](#)”, Conflict Trends, No. 2, 15-21, Table p. 17

4. UNECA (2013) African Governance Report III: Elections and the Management of Diversity, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press/UNDP.

5. E. Gyimah-Boadi (2015) “Africa’s Waning Democratic Commitment”, Journal of Democracy, Vol. 26 (1): 101-113, p. 102.

6. Amilcar Cabral cited in Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja (2006) ‘Challenges to state building in Africa’ African Identities 4 (10): 71-88: 72.

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- JULIUS NYERERE -

Today, Presidents Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Paul Kagame of Rwanda and Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi, claim to protect order against chaos and violence. Yet it was violent police repression of protesters against a Presidential third term that provoked massive refugee flight from Burundi in 2014 and 2015. After two of the five-member Electoral Commission fled and members of the Constitutional Court received death threats, the remaining judges ruled in favour of the President standing for election again!⁸ In the 2016 presidential elections in Uganda, after protests following the results, opposition leader Besigye was arrested without charge, and only released once the constitutionally-specified time limit for challenging election results had elapsed.⁹ After 30 years of his Presidency, 'Uganda's constitution was amended to allow Museveni to remain in office for life'.¹⁰

Democracy's downs and ups

Democracy can be risky. The Rwandan genocide followed close on democratic reforms in the early 1990s, reforms imposed

7. Vencovsky
"Presidential term limits in Africa" op. cit.
8. ["New blow to Nkurunziza as top Burundi election official flees; may be a 'catastrophe'"](#), Mail and Guardian Africa, 30 May 2015, [accessed 3 August 2015].
9. Bariyo, Nicholas (2016) ["Ugandan Police Detain Main Opposition Leader, Raid His Party's Headquarters"](#) The Wall Street Journal 22 February 2016.
10. Venconsky,
"Presidential term limits in Africa", op. cit. p. 18.
11. Aggrey, Mutambo (2016) ["Annan urges Africa's 'life presidents' to retire to prevent rebellion"](#) Daily Nation, 20 April 2016.
12. Jambo News Spot, ["Kenya Presidential Election Results 2013"](#), by constituency, show strong tendency to polarized voting in different regions of the country.
13. Carothers "The End of the Transition

by the West amidst civil war and economic retrenchment. As the late Kofi Annan warned:

If a leader doesn't want to leave office, if a leader stays on for too long, and elections are seen as being gamed to suit a leader and he stays term after term after term, the tendency may be the only way to get him out is through a coup or people taking to the streets...I think Africa has done well; by and large the coups have more or less ended, generals are remaining in their barracks, but we are creating situations which may bring them back.¹¹

Scepticism about political democracy without accompanying economic and social justice is justified. So are fears of scapegoating minorities. Electoral violence in Kenya resulted from rising expectations, and protests and violence provoked by Kibaki's 'politricks' in seeking a third term in office.¹² Anger and frustrated hopes can be diverted, finding form in the persecution of minorities, like Kenyan Somalis, who today are experiencing the same scapegoating that resulted from the colonial 'divide and rule' policies before independence.

When electorates become dispirited, their anger can be channelled by politicians along sectarian lines, producing 'ethnic' polarization and even violence. Indeed, early optimism about democratic transition per se may be evaporating among scholars too, as countries

Paradigm" op cit., quotations pp. 9, 17.

14. Video '[Obama addresses the African Union](#),

15. However it can be noted that these findings were in response to an 'Expert Opinion Survey', and it cannot be assumed that all experts are equally free to respond in a critical manner to such questions about their government. Data from UNECA, African Governance Report III..., op. cit., pp. 62, 67.

16. UNECA, African Governance Report, op. cit., p. 69.

17. Nalubega, Leilah and Sseunjogi Eriasa (2016) '[Museveni sworn-in as US, EU envoys walk out](#)', Monitor 13 March,

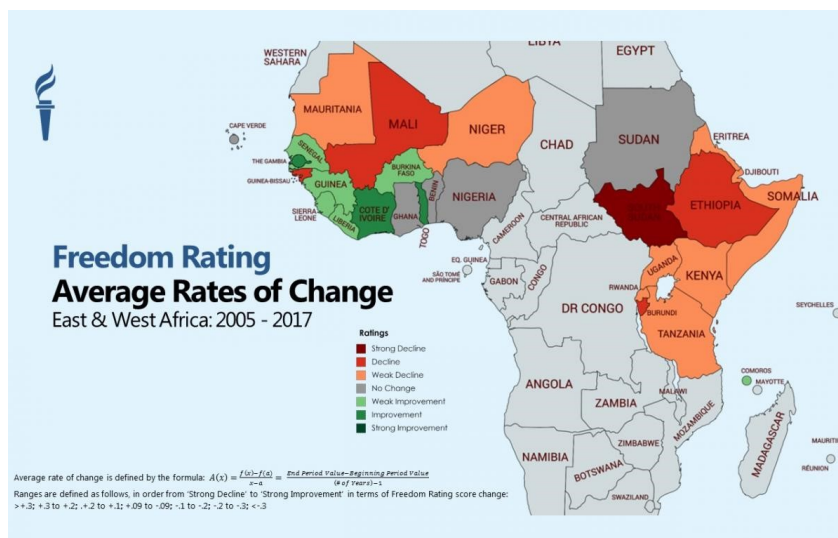
18. Niccolo Machiavelli (1950) The Prince and the Discourses, The Modern Library: New York: p. 540.

19. Makoye, Kizito and Belinda Goldsmith, '[Tanzania: Politicians Warned Off Witchcraft Ahead of Election](#)', 1 June

like Rwanda, Uganda or Burundi start to look like 'no transition' situations. As Carrothers suggests, these countries: '...are neither dictatorial nor clearly headed toward democracy.

They have entered a political gray zone...

[Perhaps] It is time for the democracy-promotion community to discard the transition paradigm'.¹³ As Barack Obama warned African leaders when talking to the African Union: 'When journalists are put behind bars and activists are threatened as governments crack down on civil society, then you may have democracy in name but not in substance'.¹⁴



Source:

<https://freedomhouse.org/blog/democratic-governance-africa-three-key-trends>

Yet even in undemocratic states, there is some good news! Rwanda's postgenocide policy of non-ethnic political identification leads it to be ranked second in Africa to Seychelles in the percentage of those

2015, [accessed 15 September 2015].

20. Makoye and Goldsmith, op. cit.

21. Julius Nyerere (1998) '[Good Governance for Africa](#)', 13 October speech at a conference, [accessed 15 September 2015].

22. Dulani, Boniface (2011) '[Democracy Movements as Bulwarks against Presidential Usurpation of Power: Lessons from the Third Term Bids in Malawi, Namibia, Uganda and Zambia](#)', Wiener Zeitschrift für kritische Afrikastudien . 20 (11): 115-139, at: [accessed 4 August 2015], p. 118.

23. Nzongola-Ntalaja, Georges (2006) 'Challenges to state building in Africa', African Identities 4 (1): 71-88: 82, 85.

24. Martin-Baro, Ignacio 'Political Violence and War as Causes of Psychological Trauma in El Salvador', International Journal of Mental Health, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 3-20, p. 3.

surveyed who agreed that: 'The Constitution protects diversity and minority interests' and that the 'government and leadership represents all segments and diverse interests'.¹⁵ Another bright spot in East Africa, irrespective of the degree of democracy, is progress in gender representation in politics. Whereas in Kenya women generally make up just 10-20 per cent of Parliamentarians, in relatively undemocratic Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda, and in slightly more democratic Tanzania, there are quotas for women. Globally, these countries are: 'In the lead... with reserved quotas'.¹⁶

In 2008, 56 per cent of Rwanda's elected parliamentarians were women, compared with 36 per cent in Tanzania and 35 per cent in Uganda. These figures compare well with 2017 figures for the UK (32 per cent), Netherlands (34.5 per cent) and of course the US Congress (19 per cent).

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And the West must take some responsibility for failures. During his May 2016 Presidential swearing-in ceremony, Museveni criticized Western meddling in Uganda's internal

economy and finances. He went on to praise China and Russia as friendly countries, willing to trade, even in weapons, without interference. At this point, EU and US delegations walked out of the ceremony. Perhaps they should have stayed, and listened for a change. Yet East African politicians undermine their own credibility when they themselves mismanage aid or fail to pay public sector salaries, for example.¹⁷

Dangerous magic

So Nyerere was right; politicians are not magicians. The ideals and promises they make before elections can turn into a raw ambition to stay in power afterwards. Questions of legitimate rule have flummoxed great thinkers for centuries. For Machiavelli, 'such evils as affect the state itself...unless they are checked and corrected by some wise hand...will cause the ruin of the state'.¹⁸ Today in East Africa, perhaps the main evils affecting the state are rising mass poverty and politicians who over-stay in office. In connection with Nyerere's tickbird metaphor, so long as those in office only feather their nests and do not attend to the general good, their rule will be precarious.

...anger can be channelled by politicians along sectarian lines...

When the stakes are high, politicians even resort to literal magic. Tanzania's Deputy Home Affairs Minister Pereira Silima, warned in June 2015: 'Tanzanian politicians...[should] steer clear of witchcraft ahead of elections... after the nation's parliament heard lawmakers could be involved in a wave of attacks on albinos whose body parts are prized in black magic'.¹⁹ One report called this: '...the first admission of its kind in parliament...[the] minister said reports linking politicians to albino killings could be true since attacks rose during elections'.²⁰ In 2014, the Tanzanian government had imposed a ban on witchcraft to control Albino killings across the country. Literal magic here has meant death and injury of victims, and the undermining of democracy. This is certainly not the magic Nyerere was referring to!

So the message is clear: if Presidents amend constitutions to gain 'indefinite leave' to remain in power, they must also provide what people need, or face the consequences. Otherwise civil society will demand democratic change.²¹ Right now: '...recent struggles for the removal of term limits have thus necessitated the interventions of democracy movements to act as bulwarks against the usurpation and personalization of power by presidents... with mixed results'.²² Structural socio-economic transformations are required for more democratic politics in future. In Nzongola-Ntalaja's view:

Democratization is a continuous process of expanding the political space to enhance participation by all, including hitherto excluded groups and strata of the population...for the poor and vulnerable groups, democracy is meaningless without economic and social rights.²³

As China, rather than the US or Europe, becomes the main economic partner of choice for East African rulers, regimes in the region may no longer play by the constitutional rule book. We end as we began, with Nyerere, who:

...warned his fellow leaders that the mwananchi (citizens) would not wait for long before seeking such miracle cures... The democratic character of a government does not depend [only]... on the way in which it is elected, but rather on the forces that determine its day-to-day conduct.²⁴

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