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Resurgent continent?: Africa and the world: political stability: crucial for growth?

Report

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Political Stability: Crucial for Growth?

At first glance it seems like a straightforward proposition. The African states that have been able to achieve high growth rates are stable; stability means a predictable political environment, which in turn attracts investment, both internally and from outside. The resulting virtuous circle of poverty reduction, job creation, increased state revenues and investment in welfare and education bring benefits to all in society such that a return to violence or chaos is in no-one's interests. Not quite Switzerland, but getting there.

But, as always, the devil is in the definitions. Specifically, what type of stability do we mean? It may seem a glib point, but there are a number of African states that do not normally make it on to the list of high-performers, that nonetheless have remarkably stable political systems. Military dictatorships are stable; Eritrea shows absolutely no signs of internal unrest yet is economically moribund, reliant on remittances and external assistance. The Gambia is tightly in the grip of President Jammeh, as it has been since 1994, and remains as impoverished as ever.

The list of long-standing Heads of State in Africa trips off the tongue: President Dos Santos of Angola has been in power since 1979, as has President Obiang of Equatorial Guinea, though interestingly each has had spectacular growth rates in recent years due to oil revenues. And change doesn't necessarily arrive even when these political survivors depart the scene. Recent years have seen a series of family successions, with Bongo *filis* seamlessly taking the reins from Bongo *pere* in Gabon, likewise the transition from Gnassingbe to Gnassingbe in Togo.

More importantly, even when an old elite seems to have been excised, incoming leaders take on the mantle of the outgoing with a barely-disguised enthusiasm. The Democratic Republic of the Congo is a good example. The hope of Mobutu's toppling in 1997 lasted barely months before Kabila's aura slipped and the old patterns of Congolese politics reasserted themselves. The seminal work on Zairean systems of government was written in the 1980s, but change a few names and it could be describing the Congo of the present, despite the cataclysmic upheavals of more than 15 years of war. Though Nigeria's byzantine politics seems to have lost the military involvement of the past, the pattern of personal enrichment, local patronage and national chaos remains the same.

Though all these examples differ significantly, the key point is that political systems based on personal networks and exploitation of the state for profit – call it neo-patrimonialism or the 'politics of the belly' – have proved remarkably robust since independence, despite a

manifest inadequacy in generating growth or meeting the basic needs of the vast majority. They have survived waves of conflict, the explosion of NGO activism, a rich variety of development orthodoxies and a never-ending stream of external actors hoping to reshape the continent. Thus far, African political elites have outlived them all.

It seems therefore that when we talk about political stability in the context of growth, resource-driven bubbles aside we mean a specific kind of stability: the rule of law, strong institutions rather than powerful individuals, a responsive and efficient bureaucracy, low corruption and a business climate that is conducive to investment. It is difficult to deny that these factors of stability seem to be important for growth, perhaps even key, but it is a rather technocratic, administrative view. Indeed, there is little here one would instinctively recognise as politics in any another context; meaningful competition between ideologies, ideas and alternative visions of state function and responsibility. In fact, what we really seem to be saying is that stable governance seems to be crucial for growth. The distinction may seem academic, but it is an important one to recognise. Governance is not politics, despite how tempting it may be to conflate them.

Take, as examples, the paradigmatic success stories of post-Cold War development interventions in Africa: Ethiopia, Rwanda and Uganda. Each has been held up as offering a new model, with efficient administrations headed by highly-capable and respected leaders. Set against the corrupt dynasties embedded elsewhere on the continent, the rise of these states from the ashes left

by years of war seemed to offer hope that the dream of progress was possible. Each has, beyond doubt, made considerable strides in rebuilding their shattered economies, infrastructures and societies.

Stable governance, to a greater or lesser extent, is manifestly present in each, particularly in comparison to the preceding regimes. But stable politics? In one sense, yes; though elections have been held in all three countries in the post-Cold War period, there has never been much of a risk of the incumbent losing. Uganda's 2006 Presidential election, the only one to be held under a multi-party system introduced the previous year, was perhaps the closest, despite the leading challenger spending half of the campaign period defending himself in court. Ethiopia's election in 2005 had a surprisingly close result, at least until a large number of opposition gains were annulled. Tens of thousands of opposition activists were detained after the resulting protests. And Rwanda's political space is tightly controlled, with all meaningful opposition parties members of a coalition with the ruling RPF, offering little by way of a genuine alternative. President Kagame won the last elections with more than 95% of the vote. So in fact, in these cases stable politics seems to be synonymous with no politics at all. Or at least, no competitive politics.

The point here is not to argue whether this is right or wrong, in spite of the premium placed on democracy in donor discourse. Rwanda's tightly controlled political sphere may be right for Rwanda, just as there are few complaints over the fact that Botswana's government has been drawn from the same political party since independence. Ghana's

competitive politics – most recently demonstrated by the peaceful handover of power after elections in 2008, despite the potentially-explosive tight margin of the result – may not fit well in Ethiopia's fractured ethnic mosaic, or the legacy of thousands of years of history and centralised administration. Rwanda is an old and proud nation, with deep-seated traditions; its political DNA has no doubt had a powerful role in shaping the current settlement.

It is instead merely to point out that though Rwandan or Ethiopian modes of governing may fit neatly with contemporary ideas of governance, and give rise to healthy growth rates – unlike the less growth-friendly patrimonial systems identified above - we should not let the binary of stability and growth obscure the complex and contingent world of local political and social realities. Instead of a technically-defined cipher, all states have their own dynamics that demand respect. They also need to be understood, particularly by those external agents seeking to shape the future of these states, but also by the continent as a whole, because the second tacit assumption underpinning the argument that political stability is crucial to growth is that growth is in turn crucial to stability.

At the risk of over-generalisation, an assumption of development policy in recent years – in as much as it has been spelled out – has been that growth will simultaneously strengthen the state and improve the lives of the poor such that competitive politics will follow naturally. In the meantime, development would improve lives to such a degree that pressure for political change would be a very long time in coming, allowing institutions and society to mature to the point where political competition would not prove too disruptive, or a catalyst for identity-based mobilisation and the risk of fracture. In other words, it has been assumed that in the short term, the overwhelmingly rural populations of African countries would be content with incremental improvements in their life chances, leading in the longer term to the emergence of an educated population with a shared understanding of the parameters of peaceful politics.

But this is not a given. Growth may bring with it different, and unanticipated, consequences. Economic growth leads to a rise in the visibility and power of the middle class, a classic catalyst for social and political upheaval. Changes in economic patterns lead to the drift of populations to the cities. The youth demographic is growing across the continent, increasingly educated and unwilling to return to the limited horizons of an agrarian life; thousands of graduates of Kampala's Makerere University end up in the city's slums every year.

Indeed, it is possible that the next wave of change in Africa will be born from these factors. Faced with a constrained politics controlled by an older generation, it may be that new poles of mobilisation will emerge; a few years ago no-one would have predicted that a former DJ would end up as President of Madagascar. A new youth politics of urban mobilisation could fundamentally reshape Africa's political landscape.

The wider point is that a world-view that exchanges politics for governance has very little ability to predict such dynamics, or produce policy that can adequately deal with them. It may be that Rwandans are indeed happy with President Kagame's ongoing leadership, and genuinely don't mind that their political alternatives are limited as long as their lives improve. It may be that Ugandans are content with Museveni and the National Resistance Movement, as long as the economy keeps growing, and Ethiopians with the continued dominance of a Tigrayan elite.

But it may not. Rwanda seemed a model of stability in the 1980s, hosting a wide variety of external actors. The failure of the international community to predict or respond to the genocide has been well documented. This is not to say that Rwanda faces similar risks today – such a conclusion is far beyond the scope of this paper – but simply that we should learn the lesson of the past and give the complex and varied political cultures of Africa the respect that is instinctively given elsewhere in the world; allowing them to be both powerfully constitutive of local realities and hugely varied across the continent.

So, to conclude, political stability is no doubt key to growth, for a given and highly particular vision of what stability means. But, while the governance agenda underlying this view is undoubtedly important, it needs to be tempered with an appreciation that other types of politics – the messy, murky, complex and local kind – cannot be wished away, and are remarkably robust. This is obvious for those states where local politics reward corruption and growth is a distant dream; for the donor darlings of recent years it may be hidden under a carapace of progress that can look all-too convincing from the cab of a white 4x4. Attitudes and policy towards Africa needs to be rooted in understanding that goes beyond the seductive simplicity of governance and growth. ■