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**BEYOND THE POLLS: THE FUTURE OF AFRICA'S MULTIPARTY  
DEMOCRACY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC POLICIES**

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# **Beyond the Polls: The future of Africa's multiparty democracy and implications for public policies** (by A. A. Komba, IDS)

## **Introduction**

"Give all power to the many they will oppress the few and give all power to the few they will oppress the many".<sup>1</sup>

For the third time in nearly fifteen years Tanzanians have gone to the polls once more and chosen new president, abandoned incumbent MPs and Councilors for new ones or handsomely re-elected the old guards. In essence Tanzania is now in fourth phase, third phase since multiparty democracy was introduced in the early 1990s. What has transpired in between is subject to different interpretations by different people including those within academic community.

However, it can be pointed out that the experience of the last two decades leaves plenty of room for political practitioners, scholars and general public to ponder over the future of multiparty democracy in Tanzania and elsewhere in the region. That is what we intend to do in this paper in the tradition of Walter Rodney and his contemporaries whose penetrating analysis has contributed much to the understanding of Africa's political and economic predicament.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore, this paper is modest attempt to contribute to ongoing debate about sustainability of Africa's multiparty democracy, that is, whether or not democracy in Africa has got any future. The concerns raised in this paper is based on the developments of the past two decades of political reforms that have seen African countries transformed from being one party states or military dictatorships into striving, so to say, multiparty democracies. Of course, this is not to suggest that things are too good for African democracies majority of them are now into third or fourth phases of administrations under the new system.

## **African democratization revisited**

So far one can identify two main schools of thought on multi-party democracy in Africa. On the one hand, there are those who are optimistic about what the newfound democracy can do, or is doing, for Africa in terms of good governance, respect for human rights and rule of law. Accordingly, these positive features of democracy that African leaders have tended to neglect in the past in the name of nation-building

or national security will eventually be translated into sustained economic growth, poverty reduction, environmental protection and many other good things for resource-rich but poverty stricken continent. Indeed, some of social, political and economic malaise that has haunted post independence Africa has been attributed to the absence of functioning democracy. The situation created conducive environment for few elite to defraud majority of Africa people thus turning them, in the words of Frantz Fanon, into the 'wretched of the earth'.

On the other hand, however, we have good number of pessimists, those who are of the opinion that multipartism is recipe for disaster for the region and those who have vigorously pushed for it in the past two decades are enemies of African people. To such people the system is ill suited to African conditions in the sense that it will undo the achievements of 'nation-building' efforts of the past three decades. Eventually the African societies will disintegrate into bitter antagonistic factions based on tribal, ethnic, religious and regional affiliations. Accordingly, 'balkanization' of Africa is for everybody to see. All in all, the diagnosis is grim for Africa's multiparty democracy.

Of course, the interesting question here is: which perspective is the correct one? There is no clear, black or white, right or wrong answer to the question. Indeed, given the experience of the past one and half decades both might as well have a point. For example, with the multiparty system we have witnessed, or witnessing, increased freedom of association and expression; more responsible political and bureaucratic elite; increasing transparency and openness in handling public affairs; enhanced role for civil society, etc. These are the things Africa badly need in its relentless search not only for peace but also meaningful share of prosperity in rapidly expanding global economy. The thrust argument here is that Combination of civil strife/wars, mismanaged economic resources and, above all, lack of democracy, together, contributed to a sorry state of affair for African population. Therefore, the democratization process coupled with good and democratic governance is seen as providing a ray of hope for good things to come!

At the same time, however, we are also witnessing emerging culture of political violence in the name of freedom of expression; abuse of democratic process through rampant political corruption and rigged elections; constitutions being tempered with impunity to suit political interests of few powerful individuals and all in the name of democracy. In this connection one can provide numerous examples to demonstrate the fact that multiparty democracy in Africa is a source of conflicts with potential for deadly outcomes.

For example, no election goes by without cry of foul from the losing parties. It happened in Zanzibar in 2000 elections and again in 2005 where CUF still refuses to recognize duly elected president. It happened in Liberia in the run-off elections and where George Weah's party lost by far. In Ethiopia, with its youthful leadership was once considered a model democracy, demonstrations over disputed election results turned deadly when riot police opened fire on unarmed demonstrators killing few dozens in the process. In Kenya violence dominated a run-up to referendum on proposed constitutional changes, which was eventually rejected. In places where presidency is limited usually to two five-year terms we have witnessed attempts to change constitutions so as to allow for the third term often on "public demand" only to be rejected by the very public. Of course, in few others, including where self-styled 'freedom-fighters' are in power, have been successful.

In view of all these there can be no doubt that multiparty democracy in Africa is a double-edged sword with the potential for doing both good and harm with unpredictable, far-reaching consequences on region's future. Therefore, the future of democracy is the function of deliberate efforts by stakeholders to maximize positive aspects of democracy and minimize the undesirables, which are in, plenty. Unfortunately, this is easier said than done as the experience of the past few years have demonstrated. This brings us to all-important question: what the future holds for Africa's multiparty democracy and what need to be done to make democracy stick?

Indeed, Africa has never faced shortage of leaders who, once in the office, do realize that they have so much to accomplish such that they have to spend the whole lifetime doing it! It partly explains the trend towards 'President for Life' of the 1960s and the 1970s and, of late, requests for additional terms in office. The truth of the matter is that if the leader cannot accomplish what he sets out to do in ten years cannot be expected to achieve much with twenty more years. By that time he will be surrounded by people whose survival depends on his continued presence in the office and thus will be telling things he want to hear, usually praises for good job done. They will be so much afraid of changes at top for fear of loosing their privileges and at this point the presidency is turned into 'den of profiteers'.

### **The future of multiparty democracy: emerging issues**

There is no doubt that holding elections on a regular basis is an important feature on a typical representative democracy that dots world's political

landscape. The polls provide opportunity for citizens to elect leaders of their choosing and entrust them with what is supposed to be a difficult task of managing public affairs for the benefit of all. As such elections serve as political barometers for gauging needs and aspirations of the people. They approve or reject political parties and/or candidates who do not meet the basic requirements assuming that they know what to expect from elected public officials. In this context, therefore, elections are not ends in themselves but they are means to some societal ends. It is the essence of democratic elections whether of mature or infant democracies. That is, people do not elect governments for sake of it but for some purpose agreed upon by majority.

While they serve useful purpose elections are not true measure of how democratic society is or is not.<sup>3</sup> The experience in Africa and elsewhere has shown that it is possible to have democratically elected political leadership that behaves in undemocratic manner. In other words, it is possible to have a government with so much power and authority that it ends up curtailing on the freedoms of its citizens who helped to put it in place. Under such circumstances political elections are used as means to ends other than that of furthering democracy and democratic values. Unfortunately, these developments are not uncommon in our emerging democracies and this what gives Africa's multiparty democracy a bad name hence the question: what future for Africa's multiparty democracy?

In posing this question it is not the same as trying to paint a gloom picture of democracy in Africa. It is an attempt to understand and may be to come terms with recent developments that are more or less threatening to derail democratization train we have worked so hard to build. It is not to question the efficacy of multiparty democracy as some pessimists have done, are doing, but to raise issues, which, if not adequately dealt with, are likely to undo whatever achievements of the last two decades. It is not a scorecard of democratization process but a modest attempt to understand the process whose complexity and dynamism is subject to varying interpretations hence conclusions.

To start with we can say that the future of democracy in Tanzania and other democracies in Africa is the function of a number of developments that are going to shape the type of society we want. First and foremost, the future of Africa's multiparty democracy depends on how African countries will learn to deal with conflicts that have come to characterize democratization process. While conflicts are common occurrences in any political system even in mature democracies but when point of contention is the outcome of democratic electoral process it raises serious questions about either the type of democracy in place or the people

helping to shape it. In other words, there must something inherently wrong with the system or process.

For example, is it feasible to build and sustain faith in the electoral process especially among people who regard themselves as being 'marginalized' or made to look like second-class citizens in their own country? What does it take to have civility in competitive politics where people win or lose election with a little bit of grace? Does democratic system have any place for those who regard themselves as natural-born leaders but lack the mandate to govern? In other words, how does the system provide room for those who are opinion that the system is staked against them however hard they try?

The second issue concern the core of democratic value: rule by majority, which allows for majority to prevail over minority. As we note above "free and fair" elections serve that purpose and all parties must respect the outcomes. It is the essence of representative democracy where elections give the 'mandate' to some sections of society to do things on behalf of others. However, there is tricky side to it that need to be addressed if the system is to work for the benefit of all stakeholders. The assumption here is that the views of the majority are the correct ones otherwise the society becomes the ultimate loser by not going along with the majority. Unfortunately, one cannot completely rule out the possibility that majority can also be wrong especially when majority are suspect to systematic manipulation as it happened in Hitler's Germany and is happening in many African democracies where elites' view often prevail.

Therefore, just because the majorities have spoken in the so-called landslide victory it does not mean that minority views have no place and can therefore be neglected at no cost. Such reasoning is dead wrong and poses serious danger to the future of Africa's multiparty democracy. If anything such attitude to democracy is important source of conflicts in the region. Put it differently, democracy in Africa has bleak future if the minorities are kept marginalized just because their views or ideas are out of step with the mainstream thinking. There is potential danger of turning majority rule into authoritarian of the majority over minority, which can be as dangerous as any other tyranny. In the words of American Statesman "absolute majority" translated into "Absolute power" is not good for democracy.<sup>4</sup>

In 'winner-takes-all' system of politics typical in most African countries this is a difficult situation to handle. It is more so for polarized politics as witness in Zanzibar today. Some have experimented with 'power sharing' by inviting the 'opposition' parties to participate in governing process. But

when you have in place "absolute majority" of over 80 per cent the winning political party can afford to do away with power sharing idea without worrying much about the loss of its political capital. Eventually, arrogance creeps in as those who have exclusive control over public resources consider themselves invincible to minority views however good or relevant they might be in sustaining democratic process. However, for sake of democracy we should wary of those who are of the view that mandate to govern means doing away with minority views no matter the consequences. Such views give multiparty democracy a bad name.

Separation of church and state is yet another issue that is likely influence how Africa's multiparty democracy shapes up and therefore worth watching. The advent of multiparty has witnessed the growing influence of the church groups in the conduct of politics. Of course, there is nothing specifically wrong with that. After all, they are part and parcel of civil society and therefore their participation in democratic process is constitutional right. The worrying feature of all this is the way some church leaders seems to be abusing their respectable positions in their communities by sowing seeds of discord that poses a serous danger to infant democracies. However, in saying this it does not mean that church leaders should desist from commenting on public issues and related policies when they know that . the welfare of their believers is being compromised one way or the other. It will amount gross irresponsibility on their part given their position, role and their understanding of social issues.

The assumption here is that our church leaders are well-schooled not only on the relationship between humankind and God but also on earthly matters as well especially when it come to the relationship between believers and their democratically elected governments. If this is the correct assumption then one need not lose much sleep over what church leaders tell their followers. If, on the other hand, the assumption is wrong then we need to be concerned with what our Church leaders say or do in the name of freedom of worship because not getting concerned could end up doing great harm to democratization process. The point we are trying to make is that for sake of democracy there is a need to keep a safe distance between politics and religion even if it means some curtailment in the freedom of worship.

On the one hand, religion and religious beliefs should not be used as platforms for preaching hatred or turning people against democratically elected governments. In other words, church leaders should not hide behind the façade of 'freedom of worship' to grind political axe or settle old scores because doing so will definitely be giving freedom of worship a bad name.

On the other hand, however, conduct of national and local politics should not be the avenue of dividing people on the basis of relationship with their God or pits one group against the other. Unfortunately, we are witnessing what can be characterized as a strange mix between politics and religion raising serious doubts about the future of democracy. It is the reality that we must come to terms with and the sooner the better. Indeed, some African democracies are already being torn apart because of their failure to ensure that the church and state do not cross path.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, recent reports that some 'born again' Christians living with HIV/AIDS are refusing medication because they have been told by their 'leaders' that God will take care of their problems should come as no surprise at all. Elsewhere, we have witnessed 'mass suicides' instigated by people who claim to be 'messengers' of God: Reverend Jones in Jonestown, Jamaica; Prophet Kibwetere in Uganda are classic examples of such leaders. In both cases thousands of followers participated in mass suicide. We see similar trends in politics where people are ready and willing to destroy property and take human lives without second thought if told to do so by their 'leaders'. The Lord Resistance Army (LRA) is waging war in Uganda in the name of God's 'Ten Commandments'! Perhaps, another rebel group without cause. Of course, such leaders cannot be wished away because they part and parcel of our democracies. Therefore, what is needed is a meaningful dialogue among stakeholders to establish proper roles for each in the process.

Lastly, the troubling feature of Africa's multiparty democracy is concern with constitutional changes. In many African countries there have been repeated calls for constitutional changes/reforms as necessary prerequisite for 'true' democracy to take root after three decades of one party or military rule. Thrust of the argument is that the future of democracy is strongly tied to changes in constitution to reflect sweeping social, economic and political transformations of the past two decades. It is true that constitutions are not cast in stone like the biblical 'Ten Commandments'. In other words, constitutions need to be flexible enough to accommodate changes taking place now and then. Put it differently, constitutions are not immune to changes if deemed necessary by stakeholders. But it also true that as Mother-law, constitution cannot be changed at the whim of few individuals wanting to defend or protect their social, political and/or economic interests. Thus, instituting changes for sake of it can be as dangerous as not having them at all.

However, it must be pointed out that constitutions, no matter how cleverly designed, cannot accommodate each and every wish of its citizens from



the ultra-left 'liberals' to the ultra-rights 'conservatives' plus many 'moderates' in between. There is always a trade-off between what is the most ideal and what is the most practical. In the end a compromise emerge as the necessary evil with some issues dear to some sections of society being left out and others taken aboard even if they are of low priority to some members. In other words, a 'perfect' constitution is hard to come by no matter the amount of resources devoted to its preparation.<sup>6</sup>

This should not be construed as attempt to downplay the need for constitutional reforms. There are genuine demands for constitutional changes that can only be ignored at the expense of multiparty democracy. For example, there are those arguing for reduced power of the presidency; more checks and balances between three pillars of the government; the government that is truly representative; gender balance among others. All these have some merit. The need is to a constitution that meets the aspirations of the citizenry and, more important, deepens democracy and sustains democratic process. Otherwise we might as end up with something much worse than what currently exists.

However, we need to be reminded of the fact that having a well-written document called the Constitution is necessary but not sufficient condition for sustainable democracy. The next logical and, perhaps, the most difficult, step is to make sure that the document is translated into something tangible: the rule of law, good governance, and respect for human rights among other things. In the matter of fact, some of the problems Africa is faced with have nothing to do with the way constitutions are framed. The problem is we have not treated our constitutions with respect they deserve thus allowing the few elites the opportunity to trample them with impunity.

In the process we have turned constitution into 'poster-child' of politics to be blamed by anybody whose interests or political ambitions are not catered for. In summary, therefore, we can say that no matter how good the constitution is there will always be those who will urge that the 'new' document is still faulty! The bottom line is that it is not the question of whether or not we should have constitutional changes. The fundamental question is: change for what purpose? What is at stake is the type of changes that are necessary for sustaining democracy and democratic process.

## Endnotes

1. This is attributed to Alexander Hamilton, the American Statesman, as quoted in DeLeron, (1998).
2. These include people like Clive Thomas, Ali Mazrui, Thomas Zentes, Issa Shivji, etc. whose writings generated interesting discourse in East African universities during the late 1960s and 1970s.
3. The point is elections are only a step, a necessary step for that matter, toward the goal of democracy. Elections cannot be viewed as the establishment of democracy because even tyrannies call for elections and get 'elected' often 'winning' 99.9 per cent of the votes. However, for all practical purpose these are well-scripted elections that have nothing to with democracy.
4. Alexander Hamilton, *op. cit.*
5. Cases in point include Nigeria where religious riots have led deaths in hundreds and conflict in Sudan that pits Arab/Muslim North and mainly Black/Christian or Animist South.
6. The recent Kenyan experience should be good reminder to many African democracies of what constitutional changes really entails.