No. 88   Jamie McGowan
Spring 2003

Political Transitions in Africa
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At the beginning of the 1980s, the majority of countries in Africa were dictatorships, either civilian or military. Levels of political competition and political participation were low, so that the citizenry exercised little choice in selecting their leaders and determining public policy, and leadership turnover was negligible. By the end of the 1990s, many countries had introduced political reforms and were at various stages of democratic transition, although there were some notable reversals. For example, in West Africa elected governments in Niger, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, and Côte d'Ivoire were overthrown and in Southern Africa there is the tragic story of Zimbabwe. Despite the setbacks, electoral politics and democratic freedoms became an accepted fact or a realizable dream of political life in much of Africa.

Several generalizations can be made about these transitions in terms of their tempo and modality. First, they happened very rapidly between the onset of massive protests and accession to office of new elected governments. Second, the patterns of transition were neither linear nor uniform, although they unfolded in distinct phases, amidst setbacks, deviations, blockages and other interruptions. In most cases the transition process began as authoritarian regimes lost legitimacy due to escalating economic and political crises, which triggered mass protests that became increasingly uncontainable and politicized. Almost invariably, the mass protests were initially concentrated in urban areas, galvanized by the grievances of restive students, the disgruntled working people, and the newly pauperized middle classes.

The protest coalitions comprised old and new social movements, such as trade unions, professional associations, especially lawyers and teachers, women's groups, community and non-governmental organizations, religious leaders, environmentalists and human rights activists. This heterogeneity was both a blessing and a curse for the reform movements, giving them populist punching power, on the one hand, and intense ideological infirmity, on the other. In some cases conflicting interests and visions within the protest movement proved fatal for political liberalization and later for democratic consolidation. At first Third World leaders, long used to undisputed power and the fantasies of their own popularity and providence, did not take the protests seriously. But as they mounted, incumbent regimes responded with the customary sticks of repression and the untried carrots of reform. The pendulum swung increasingly towards reform depending on the strengths of the protest movement and the weaknesses of the regime and the complex conjuncture of regional and international forces, which either emboldened the reform movement to press for more fundamental changes or reinforced its fragmentation as the inherently centrifugal forces sighted the prize of state power.

The actual mechanisms and modalities of transition from dictatorship to democratic elections took three broad paths. Needless to say, the actual trajectories of transition varied considerably within each particular path. In virtually all cases there were fierce struggles over the liberalization of rules governing the procedures of political competition and participation, and the structure of government and governance. In contexts of blurred boundaries between party and state, military and civilian apparatuses, or even the leader and the state leviathan, the strategies of political liberalization were bound to vary.

First, there were countries where opposition parties were legalized and multiparty elections

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authorized through amendments to the existing constitutions by the incumbent regime, with varying degrees of agitation by the opposition forces. This pattern was followed mainly in one-party states where the opposition forces were too weak or fragmented to force national regime capitulation and the regime itself still enjoyed considerable repressive resources and hegemonic capacities. The second path was through national conferences, which brought together members of the political class and the elites of civil society to forge a new political and constitutional order. The national conferences worked in favor of the reform movements in countries where they were held early before incumbent regimes had learnt how to manipulate them, and where the opposition was strong and united and the regime weakened and fractionalized.

Finally, there was the path of managed transition pursued by military oligarchies. Their attempt to oversee and tightly control the process and pace of political reform was facilitated by their monopoly of coercive resources, the conceits of bureaucratic rationality and patrimonial fantasies of national guardianship, and also served as an insurance against retribution for abuses of power in future. Nonetheless the military was responding to the rising costs of prolonged and unproductive caretaking as domestic protests mounted, the demands for rentier services in superpower wars and conflicts diminished, and as the long years of politicization and misrule finally began coming home to roost, sapping professional confidence and cohesion and public faith and fear.

But what led to these transitions in the first place? How can we explain them beyond the overwhelming flows of daily news and contingent details? What kinds of democracies have people in Africa been fighting for? What is, or rather, what are the futures of the democratic projects? The debates about the origins of this contemporary wave of democratization in Africa are too well known to detain us much here. Suffice it to say, there are four inter-related levels of analytical dispute. The first set of issues concerns the question of whether these transitions have a long history or are recent; second, the relative roles of structural factors as opposed to individual actions and events; third, the degree to which national and international factors have played a role; fourth, the relative explanatory power of economic versus political factors. I do not believe a movement as vast and complex as Africa's wave of democratization in the 1990s can be fitted into neat and singular explanations.

This movement may have become self-evident from the 1980s, and entered an explosive phase in the 1990s, but it did not emerge out of a temporal desert. It was rooted in long histories of struggle against the material depredations and moral deformities of the past, in Africa's case those of slavery, colonial despotism, and postcolonial misrule. The very fact that the democratic struggles were widely seen as struggles for the "second independence" testifies to the unbroken memories and unfulfilled dreams of earlier independence struggles. The ease with which old parties that had been proscribed sometimes for a generation re-emerged, the energies with which the protest movements expressed themselves, the languages and strategies they used, from violent street demonstrations to polite legal campaigns, were often reminiscent of the heydays of anti-colonial nationalist struggles, and the connections they established with the once beloved but abused masses suggested deep historical continuities, a re-awakening of profound yearnings for freedom. Thus, the reform movements of the 1990s derived their strength from the rich reservoirs of struggle in their respective societies, while at the same time they were creating new traditions, forging new memories that recast the pasts and futures of liberation.

This suggests that the transitions were products of both individual agents and events, of contingent conflicts and compromises, operating in structured contexts of power, resources, and possibilities. The actors in these dramas improvised as they went along, but they improvised on a script with some structure. In short, contingency and structure were interwoven, and cumulatively as the struggles intensified and reforms were implemented, both the contextual parameters and chain of subsequent events were altered. A purely structuralist approach veers towards historical determinism and a contingent one tends to voluntarism. One offers schematic preconditions, such as the equation between democracy and certain levels of economic development, an equation beloved by both western commentators dismissive of democratic prospects in Africa and Africa's own dictators seeking refuge from the cheeky demands of democracy in underdevelopment. The other suffers from preoccupation with the present and the fiction of free choice, and offers us analyses that swing with every newspaper headline, thereby exaggerating or underestimating the obstacles or possibilities of democratization in Africa. This is an argument for taking a long historical approach one informed by a clear understanding that human agency is the glue that binds structure and contingency together, moving them forward to new states of possibility.

No less vexing has been the debate about whether national or international forces played the determining role. The proponents are not beyond appropriating each other's clothes when it suits them. And so those who argue that international forces were predominant -- by which they refer to the end of the Cold War, the demonstration effects of communism's extinction in Central and Eastern Europe, and the imposition of political conditionalities by western bilateral and multilateral financial institutions--tend to attribute the origins and implementation of political

liberalization and democratization to outside forces, but blame any failures on domestic forces. Similarly, those who advocate the primacy of domestic forces behind democratic reforms--by which they refer principally to the power of social movements and the disintegration of the legitimacy of the postcolonial state--are not averse to blaming any blockages and reversals on external dependencies and conspiracies.

The reality of the matter, in my view, is that Africa's transitions during the late 1980s and 1990s while obviously rooted in domestic struggles against both internal and external forces of oppression and exploitation, were occurring in the context of simultaneous, multiple and contradictory transformations in the global order, which affected, and were in turn affected by, developments in Africa. The demonstration effects of regional events and transitions--Benin in Francophone West Africa, the Palestinian Intifadah in the Arab world, and South Africa across Africa--were far more critical than those in Europe. In short, people in Africa were neither bit players in other people's histories, nor were they insulated from other people's histories. But deciphering the exact connections and causalities between internal and external factors is not easy; in the literature it often amounts to nothing more than noting the synchronicity of events and the self-serving rhetoric of the new western missionaries of democracy.

Perhaps the least fruitful of the debates is that which seeks to attribute Africa's democratization either to economic or political factors. There is much merit in the old Marxian political economy approach, in which politics and economics are not treated as separate spheres, but integrated processes of cause and effect. There can be little doubt that what holds the two together in Africa's context, providing both the fuel and the trigger for the reform protests, are structural adjustment programs that were imposed with uncompromising zeal by the World Bank and the IMF. These programs shattered the independence social contract, and the already tottering pedestals of postcolonial state legitimacy, rationality, and autonomy came tumbling down. In short, struggles against the austerities and autocracies of SAPs by ever widening circles of social classes, soon became politicized, culminating in popular demands for political and economic change, to establish new conditions of living, new conventions of citizenship and governance.

Clearly, then, the struggles for democracy in Africa in the 1990s represented the latest moment of accelerated change in a long history of struggles for freedom, an exceptionally complex moment often driven by unpredictable events and new social movements and visions, anchored in the specific histories and conditions of each country, in which national, regional, and international forces converged unevenly and inconsistently, and economic and political crises reinforced each other, altering the terrain of state-civil society relationships, the structures of governance, and the claims of citizenship. But what kinds of democracies have people in Africa been fighting for? The answers may indeed be as many as the social movements themselves. Each of these movements is inspired by visions of society embedded in the imaginary of its social base, variously organized around the spatial boundaries of nation, region, and community, the social inscriptions of ethnicity, class, and gender, and the myriad ideological idioms that have characterized African social and political thought over the decades.

My focus on elections aside, people in Africa have certainly been fighting for more than the rights to periodic electoral contests and good governance. In addition to the civil rights of liberal democracies, informed by their own long and unyielding histories of foreign domination and underdevelopment, they have also been fighting for rights to self-determination and sustainable development, struggles that have becoming even more pressing in our age of triumphalist free-market globalization and narrow systemic options. As in the struggles for the first independence, ordinary people in Africa are looking for developmental democratic states that can offer them political freedoms, economic well being, and cultural comforts, that can expand the possibilities of their humanity. This is the humanistic thread that ties the countless stories about democratic struggles in Africa.

Democratic consolidation has taken and will continue to take different paths, conditioned by the constellation of state forms, social movements, class and ethnic forces, regional and international developments facing each country, and the state of its economy and its political traditions. It may safely be said that the future of Africa's democratic projects will hinge as much on the ability of the new regimes to deliver economic development as on their commitment to safeguarding hard-won political freedoms. None of us really knows what the future will bring, how many of these democratic experiments will succeed or fail, the innovations that they will bring to global democratic practice, and what the legacies of the 1990s will be. What we can be sure of, if history is anything to go by, is that people in Africa will continue to fight for better modes of governance and development, in short for more generous ways of living and being human. The democratic wave of the 1990s, unpredictable before then, with all its painful reversals and setbacks, widened the scope of freedoms and expectations for people in Africa. Representing the pluralization of associational life and the expansion of political space, it should teach us that history is indeed full of surprises.

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