Will Africa’s democracy survive?

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The dramatic shift towards a global *novus ordo* has had profound repercussions for Africa – albeit somewhat later in the day than elsewhere. The present era of catalysing demands for democratic pluralism and for an end to single-party hegemonic domination has been dubbed Africa’s “second liberation”. An emboldened and deeply disillusioned civil society is confronting and ousting many of the continent’s military and one-party dictatorships.

This unprecedented opposition to the authoritarian yoke has been underpinned by the OECD countries who regard the implementation of multiparty politics and open government as a *sine qua non* for financial assistance and improvements in the economic sphere.

As a consequence of these triple external and internal pressures (collapse of the USSR and its Eastern European empire, Western pressures for democratic reform, internal opposition to authoritarian government), in the period 1991 to October 1993 no less than 11 African leaders lost their positions – the highest turnover since the OAU was created in 1963. More widely, political changes since 1989 had led to the trebling of the functioning *de jure* multiparty states (with elections in almost all of them) from 10 to 31 towards the end of 1993. (See page 198.)

These developments have raised real hopes for better governance in Africa which, in turn, is fundamental to any chance of sustained economic recovery. But the surge towards democratization and the medicine inherent in structural alterations to the economy will inevitably mean a painful and extended period of adjustment – with parallel problems relating to domestic and regional security.

The dynamics behind the new African *modus vivendi* are relatively easy to quantify. However, the crucial questions remain: will Africa be able to sustain the drive towards representative government? Is it possible to control, contain and end violent conflict? In short, can democracy be nurtured to survive?

For Africa, the superpower *rapprochement* of the late 1980s and the subsequent conclusion to the Cold War represent something of a mixed blessing. To be sure, the end of major power confrontations on the continent with the waning of Africa’s geopolitical significance has brought some measure of comfort. But the relaxation of East-West tensions has ushered in well-founded fears that Africa is drifting off the map of world concerns and that sub-Saharan Africa in particular has become peripheral to the international agenda. In addition, competition for resources has never been greater and countries that cannot demonstrate that they are utilizing aid effectively – and that means transparency and sensible economic policy – will lose it.

Of course, the West has long-standing historical and ethical commitments to Africa. In addition, there are signs of a growing cultural and political awareness of the continent among African-Americans. And as far as South Africa itself is concerned, there is a genuine West European desire to see the RSA fully resuming its natural role as the engine-room for the growth and regeneration of a dying continent.

The changing criteria for economic developmental assistance – the new conditionalities – clearly suggest that the outside world will *not* disengage so long as the contentious, but necessary, principle of linkage between foreign assistance and political/economic reform is maintained.

To sum up, it would seem that – so long as African governments embrace externally encouraged programmes/guidelines for democracy, human rights, security expenditures and open accountable government – the dire predictions for a massively marginalized Africa will not in fact come to pass. The main emphasis, however, will continue to focus on good governance as the vital factor in sustaining economic reform.

However, this is not to say that Western donors are intent on imposing immutable yardsticks and specifications irrespective of local circumstances and conditions. In this regard, the West is already showing a degree of flexibility in its approach to Africa.

But for all the above, and despite the promising reforms, formidable obstacles remain to the spread of democracy on the continent.

Political freedom has taken on the profile of a panacea for all the causes of popular discontent. Herein lies the danger. If democracy fails to deliver material prosperity, there could be a rapid return to the disenchantment that leads logically to the re-establishment of dictatorship. The economic underpinnings of democracy therefore remain crucial.

An additional problem is that even if the democratic process does produce competent, honest and open administrations, the
African continent can do little by itself to alter its unfavourable international economic circumstances (terms of trade, debt burden, dependence on commodity exports, etc).

Another major hurdle is the question of disputed electoral results, an issue that looms large in Angola, where the transition was disrupted following Unita's rejection of the September 1992 presidential and legislative elections, and in Nigeria, where the military government annulled the June 1993 presidential vote.

In the fourth place, many African governments' public acceptance of the requirement for more democracy has not been accompanied by an equal commitment to encourage or permit the freedoms upon which democracy rests: tolerance, a free and vigorous press and freedoms of assembly and speech. For as can be seen in Kenya and Cameroon, it is quite possible to have multipartyism in which the opposition parties and press are intimidated and therefore rendered largely ineffective.

Fifthly, many African governments continue to maintain strong military and para-military forces whose loyalties—often ethnically reinforced—lie primarily with the ruling civilian elite. These units are frequently resistant to democratic trends—as was so graphically demonstrated in Burundi by the October 1993 coup attempt by a rebel faction in the Tutsi-dominated army.

Related to the above is the thorny question of demobilizing both government and rebel troops and reconstituting a unified army—one of the most difficult, but most important, conditions for free elections. The status of demobilized soldiers (many of whom have abandoned ideology for crime) is closely connected to another legacy of the Cold War, the accumulated proliferation of infantry weapons. Many parts of the continent are almost literally awash with arms. What makes matters worse is that conventional disarmament in Europe has produced a second wave of cheap weapons worldwide, which could engender further disruptions in view of the apparent resurgence of economic and ethnic conflicts in Africa.

Finally, the drive for democracy has led to polarization of particularistic groupings as parties crystalize mostly on the basis of tribal, regional and religious interests instead of coalescing around common ideology or political principles—all of which jeopardizes the unity and stability of the state. And once ethnic conflict gets out of hand, it has the potential to plunge the state into full-scale civil war in which thousands are killed and entire communities are internally or externally displaced. Such wars break up the country's physical infrastructure and seriously disrupt the vital agricultural sector which provides for the livelihood of most African families. Here it is crucial to stress that mass starvation in Africa owes more to warfare than to drought. Indeed, famine has never occurred on the continent unless warfare has coincided with drought.

For all the above, a glimmer of light on the "Dark Continent" can be detected. Africa's "second liberation" has been set in motion and the global community has not written off Africa altogether. Free or relatively free elections (of which recently there have been almost two dozen) constitute a key element in the process of transition; however, they are not in themselves sufficient. But while one can point to some success in Africa during the past few years, these economic and political gains can still be reversed. In short, the transition to democracy and development has begun, although it is by no means guaranteed. For the remainder of this century, one of the hardest tasks will be that of maintaining support for policies which will inevitably make most people poorer without simultaneously the ambition and will to succeed in the years to come. At the same time, Africa will have to come to terms with, and reconcile, the contest between the political forces of fragmentation and the economic imperative of integration.