

## **Politics, Democracy and Governance in Africa: A Bird's Eye View**

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### **I. Introduction**

In this era of heightened globalization, it is rare that one can listen to the radio, watch the TV or read local and international newspapers and journals without hearing of depressing stories, or seeing gruesome pictures reflecting the anguish of people fleeing injustice and armed conflict. Be it in Cote d’Ivoire, the DRC, Somalia, or Uganda, graphic pictures are always fighting for space on the TV screens or in newspapers and journals depicting people running away from conflict situations in quest for peace and safety. Thus, while it had been our hope that the resources that had been devoted to arms race during the East-West rivalry could, after the Cold War, be diverted into activities aimed at reducing the world’s poverty, our planet is still troubled not only by massive military build-up coupled with wastage of resources, but also by numerous threats to international peace and security in this globalized world: environmental decay, terrorism, drug trafficking, massive human displacement, capital flight, biting poverty, the AIDS pandemic, heart wrenching corruption, as well as gross violation of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Africa stands at a crossroads of these world’s profound realities in the midst of its wealth. Needless to say that the African leadership must remain seized of the fact that the continent’s wealth is not only a blessing but also a curse! Africa’s enormous potential wealth cannot be questioned: 90 percent of the world’s platinum; 85 percent of the chromium; 80 percent of the phosphate; 75 percent of the manganese; over 50 percent of the gold resources; and 50 percent of the natural diamond reserve.

Africa too is not without considerable skilled human capital although much of it has had to flee to the developed West and the relatively more developing countries of the East; while some remains essentially unexploited. It has vibrant fauna and flora and a huge fresh water reservoir, all awaiting exploitation. In fact, it is believed that the combined Hydro-Electric Power of the continent’s rivers is the greatest in the world. The African rift valley is believed to be one of the wonders of the continent. In most parts of Africa, the climate is but gentle; and the air fresh, pure and fragrant. Furthermore, nobody can doubt Africa’s rich cultural diversity: multi-ethnic, multi-

religious, multi-lingual, and multi-color, all providing excellent opportunities for **forging unity in diversity**. Why then has this incredibly rich continent remained a home to so many poor people: over 350 million living on less than a US \$ a day; constant power shortages; a debt burden of over US \$ 360 billion; and the only continent where women make up 70 to 80 percent of the poorest people?

Africa is poor in the midst of plenty not only because of the continent's experience with slavery, apartheid and colonialism, but also because of wastage of human and material resources, refusal to value our own people's professional worthiness, coupled with the application of non-achievement criteria in the selection of public servants. Furthermore, our failure to consult, dialogue and listen to each other for consensus building in the process of conducting state affairs has also helped to stifle our economy. We are also poor because we have failed to use politics and democratic governance as vehicles for development. Simply put, **the trouble with Africa is its leadership** that has remained largely insensitive to the negative effects of globalization.

It is in Africa where ruling parties and opposition parties find it difficult to do business as partners; where some of our leaders do not feel obliged to consult the governed; where research is not always utilized for publication and policy formulation to enhance development but is sometimes left to gather dust on the shelves due to political differences; where millions of United States Dollars are spent on educating children annually, only for them flee to the developed world due to political intolerance; where education is generally for a few, and ignorance for all; where those in the Diaspora are simply forgotten mainly because some of them are perceived to be "enemies of the state"; where globalization is only benefiting a few, while the majority wallow in poverty; and where peace building has remained essentially elusive. Of course, there have been some countries in Africa such as Botswana and Mauritius that have been enjoying relative peace and stability since independence due to good governance. However, overall, there are still a lot of domestic issues about democratic governance that remain unresolved, and which has prevented our continent to assert itself in the world, as a community of nations.

This is critical since there are those in today's world who feel that because Africa is home to so many untapped resources, countries like China, India, Japan and Russia, and the traditional Western powers like the U S, Britain, Germany, France and Italy are likely to descend on Africa in a bid to grab the continent's enormous resources. They further argue that such a move will have an untold impact on the African economies; and might also unleash upheaval on the political landscape of Africa, thereby repeating the 1960s when coup after coup, usually hatched outside the continent, and border crisis after border crisis, destabilized Africa. How do we then avert such future external influence?

Our journey to averting Africa's global calamities will start with developing a common understanding of what politics, governance and democracy mean; since it is these three concepts that can glue society together, or rupture it altogether. Further, it is important for Africa to think in terms of re-organizing its space by working together in addressing such global issues as conflicts, and building a common home for its people; just as Europe and the Americas are doing, in order to avert the negative effects of globalization.

## II. Definitions Of Concepts

### (i) Politics

It is often said that politics is too serious a matter to be left to politicians alone; perhaps that is why the term has evoked so many definitions. There are those who define “politics” simply as the art of the possible; a definition akin to the late Julius Nyerere’s assertion that in politics, **one plus one is not necessarily two, it can be five**. Politics has also been seen as the systematic way of organizing hatreds in which intrigues, dishonesty, treachery, or violence may be applied to dehumanize political competitors. Others define “politics” as “... the process and method of making decisions for groups.” Others still define politics as “...the distribution of power within a society”

Politics has also been defined as “...the activities of government,” which implies that those who fall outside the domain of government or non-state actors have no business with politics. Equally interesting is the definition of politics as a struggle for power; where power is seen as a means to bake the national development cake and remain the final authority to distribute it. In other words, the power to distribute the cake **must not be shared with the political opponents** who might sabotage the efforts of the governing party as they may implement policies they are opposed to. Politics has again been defined as “non-violent war,” where war has also been described as “the severest form of politics” since it leads to witch-hunting the so-called political enemy; a practice that in Africa did not start yesterday, for soon after independence, Ghana’s first post-independence leader, Kwame Nkrumah, declared: “It is our intention to tighten up the regulations and to wipe out the disloyal elements of the civil service, even if by so doing we suffer some temporary dislocation of the service. For disloyal servants are no better than saboteurs.”

The definition of the term “politics” that enjoys our support is one which regards politics as “...the process by which a community’s decisions are made, rules for group behavior are established, competition for positions of leadership is regulated, and the disruptive effects of disputes are minimized.” This definition contains three elements that make politics a source of joy: the element of community participation in the decision making process; the element of adopting rules for group behavior; as well as the element of minimizing the disruptive character of disputes; for while constructive disputes are inevitable in society and may even add value to the development process, destructive disputes are those that are violent and harmful to the social system. They are costly and are not inevitable. It is such disputes that we need to eradicate from the political landscape of Africa through the instrumentality of politics; while managing constructive disputes for positive outcomes.

### (ii) Governance

Broadly defined, “governance is the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of a country’s affairs at all levels”. The concept embraces all the complex methods, relationships, and institutions that societies use to distribute power, manage resources, and cope with disputes. In this context, “governance” encompasses all institutions in society and

is not necessarily limited to the state apparatus. The concept embraces three domains: the public sector which creates a conducive political and legal environment; civil society which contributes to political, social and economic development; and the private sector which generates jobs, income and wealth. Good governance is participatory, transparent, accountable and equitable; and promotes the rule of law, which is fundamental to any democratic society. Within the realm of conflict management, while irresponsible governance leads to conflict formation and societal decay, good governance is the institutionalization of a society's capacity to prevent, manage and ultimately resolve conflict peacefully, so as to add value to sustainable development. In this regard, the concept of good governance is underpinned by: visionary and collective leadership, popular participation and decentralization, accountability and transparency, respect for the rule of law and promotion of human rights, commitment to public interest, and enhanced administrative capacity as well as enduring cooperation between state organs, civil society and the private sector.

### **(iii) Democracy**

“Democracy” means many things to many people. Like the three blind men who touched the same elephant and described it variously, while the basic principles of democracy are universal, the standards may vary from one culture to another. That is why we could talk of West-Minister democracy, American democracy, Asian democracy, Russian democracy or African democracy with its emerging offshoot of “Third Term” democracy. For some of us, what all these different versions of democracy boil down to is our ability to create propitious conditions in our society in which our people can freely determine how they are governed, by whom and for how long. In other words, power belongs to the people to the extent that they are allowed to use that power to control their destiny, but within the limits of the law of the land. Thus, the pillars of democracy would include the following properties:

- Sovereignty of the people, rather than the state;
- Government based on the consent of the governed;
- Majority rule but matched by respect for minority rights;
- Guarantee of basic human rights for all;
- Free, fair and periodic elections;
- Equality before the law;
- Constitutional limits on government as enshrined in the national constitution;
- Social, economic and political pluralism;
- Ability of the ruled to hold the rulers accountable; and
- Values of political tolerance, accommodation, pragmatism, cooperation and compromise, justice, fairness and greater equality.

It is important to note that democracy in our societies has never been static but has been evolving over time. Thus, building democracy is not an event; nor is it instant coffee. Rather, it is a dynamic process; an enduring struggle and, indeed, an un-finished business or work in progress since no country in the world can legitimately claim that it is fully democratic. Moreover, in many respects, democracy is nothing but a set of rules for managing disputes or conflicts in society on a coordinated and sustainable basis through such processes as prevention, negotiation,

mediation and consensus building, based on a people's culture, history, and levels of economic development.

One critical element of democracy that deserves special emphasis is that you cannot democratize society by undemocratic means. As an example, elections are an important aspect of democracy; but the use of hate language in the campaign process to discredit political opponents does not augur well with democratic governance. Mutual respect and tolerance are the bedrock of multiparty democracy. There are some countries under multiparty democracy but where the Head of State holds regular sessions with the opposition leaders to discuss issues of national interest.

### **III. Interplay Between Politics, Governance and Democracy: The African Experience**

The three concepts that we are dealing with today are not mutually exclusive since, in reality, they can globally influence and reinforce each other either in generating joy or distress for our people. In my presentation, I will dwell more on the kind of distress that these three global concepts have been generating, both in time and space, as to make life almost unbearable for some of our people. But I will also argue that although Africa has performed rather dismally in advancing the cause of democratic governance, the continent has made some significant achievements that cannot be glossed over.

First of all, the value of Africa's potential wealth must be seen through the prism of the conflagration of violent conflicts and wars, often sponsored and nurtured by external powers that have been ravaging the continent: from Algiers to Cape Town, and from Mogadishu to Bissau, preying on its wealth and plunging the continent into an abyss of poverty and pestilence.

In quantitative terms, between 1956 and 1996, 67 military coups de'tat were staged in Africa, leading to the loss of 27 Presidents and Prime Ministers. About 85 violent changes of government have taken place in Africa since 1952, leading to the ouster of 94 African leaders. Furthermore, over the last 40 years, about 40 percent of Sub-Saharan Africa has experienced at least one period of civil war. Indeed, while the Islamic Republic of the Comoros has seen a record of 19 coups and several attempted coups since its independence, in 1975, Sierra Leone has witnessed 4 successful coups since independence; while Uganda and Nigeria have endured about 6 and 7 violent changes of government, respectively, since independence.

In terms of death, internal displacement and property destruction, Idi Amin's bloody rule of 1971-1979 claimed about 500,000 lives, forget about the hundreds of thousand more who had to flee into exile. Joseph Kony's 20-year-old diabolical war has killed thousands of people, maimed others, and internally displaced over 1.7 million, while leading to the abduction of 25,000 children. The Rwanda genocide of 1994 claimed over 800,000 lives. In Burundi, since 1965, almost 500,000 people have perished.

By the time Somalia's President Siad Barre was ousted in 1991, over 300,000 people had been killed; 800,000 others had fled the country as refugees; and 1.2 million had been internally displaced. Somalia now remains a dismembered and collapsed state due to the Somali people's determined effort to put their personal interests above those of the state.

Without going deeper into the turmoil that our continent has been going through since independence, mainly as a result of globalization, suffice it to say that conflicts in Africa have not only killed, but also maimed and sowed seeds of hate and divisions among people. They have destroyed property, ruptured infrastructure, uprooted people from their familiar domestic environments; destroyed the environment; undermined both local and foreign investor confidence; weakened the economic power of our people to depend on foreign donors for survival; intensified terrorism; exacerbated arms race; resulted in expensive humanitarian undertakings; caused people to invest less and spend more; traumatized people; and have helped to divert Africa's resources from meaningful development into the prosecution of war, mainly fuelled and sustained by the merchants of death outside Africa. In light of all this, five observations on Africa's conflict scene, within the framework of the **continent's resource curse**, are appropriate at this juncture.

First, Africa's poverty is wealth turned upside down. Second, the resource base of the poor, especially those in internally displaced camps, is their labor, which we have failed to mobilize to create more wealth and, thus, minimize the tempo of conflict. Third, Africa's resource base is believed to be potentially more than it would take to eradicate poverty. Unfortunately, much of this resource base is being wasted away in senseless wars and their attendant problems of death and mutilation, forced migration, the scourge of brain-drain, all of which have made Africa a reliable donor to the developed world. Fourth, globalization appears to be one of the greatest threats to peace in Africa since it tends to heighten levels of poverty especially through the mushrooming of multi-national corporations, now more powerful than some governments, as well as instability through arms race. It is true that former Liberian President, Charles Taylor, has been dragged into the Special Court for Sierra Leone; but has anybody dragged the international suppliers of military hard wares in Antwerp to the same Court? Equally, Joseph Kony of Uganda has been indicted by the International Criminal Court; but have the arms suppliers in the outside world been similarly indicted? Finally, Africa's scourge of conflicts, as largely encouraged by external powers is largely a function of breakdowns in politics and democratic governance coupled by our failure to organize our abundant resources for greater and shared prosperity. But is Africa a failed continent?

#### **IV. Some of Africa's Historical Failures and Achievements in Politics and Democratic Governance**

Historically, decades of power by one party systems in Africa right after independence in the early 1960s, followed by the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s, helped to exclude the majority of the civilian populations from participating in the activities that affected their lives. Although we had been united in our search for independence in the process of which Africa bled so profusely, we had not agreed on the form of governance to shape the future of our continent. The Africans who took over power from the then departing colonialists were so much in a rush to nurture the administrative structures and policies of the colonial regimes that very few of them ever thought of the form of governance that was suitable for Africa. Political power, rather than domestic governance, was the issue of the day. This attitude was clearly articulated by Kwame Nkrumah's two political slogans of "Give us power to manage or mismanage our affairs" and "Seek ye first the Political Kingdom, and everything else will be added unto you." Moreover, the

first generation of African civilian leaders was basically Pan-Africanist. As Ghana was, for instance, celebrating globally its accession to independence, in 1957, Nkrumah, told the world “independence is meaningless unless linked up with the total liberation of the African continent.” However, the second generation of African leaders, which was basically nationalist, wanted to have a tyrannical grip on every facet of national life, in order to quickly get to Africa’s final destination. Then came Africa’s third generation of leaders who were ushered in by wars of heightened expectations, liberating Africa the second time round, and shooting in power from Africa’s bushes. Here we see a shift from tyranny to “Third Term” democracy. But will this “Third Term” democracy endure, when it recently succeeded in Uganda and Chad, but had crumbled in Malawi and Zambia before, and again recently met its death-knell in Nigeria?

Be that as it may, absence of common standards of governance that our first and second generation of leaders had failed to adopt as manifested in the retention of the principle of “non interference” in the internal affairs of other states, helped to flare up conflicts which, in turn, strangled economic growth and development. It took over 30 years for the OAU to realize that “non interference” did not mean indifference in the internal affairs of other states, but rather a requirement for all the Africans to act as each other’s keeper. That is why a Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution was set up at the OAU headquarters, in 1993.

Subsequently, realizing that the OAU that had been created principally for the liberation of Africa could no longer satisfy the competing demands of the African people in the realm of democratic governance, in 2001, the African Union was put in place with peace and security as one of its pillars nested on the need to build partnerships between the African Union, governments and all segments of society: the private sector, those in the Diaspora as well as professional and industrial associations for purposes of building bridges of durable peace and sustainable development. A Peace and Security Council was subsequently created as Africa’s supreme organ for consolidating the gains so far made by our pan-African Organization in the area of peace and security. Around the same time, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) was established for purposes of consolidating and accelerating Africa’s gains in the democratization process, while harnessing Africa’s resources to create wealth for shared prosperity among the peoples of Africa, and for fostering peace, security and stability on the continent.

Along with NEPAD is the African Peer Review Mechanism set up as one of the key programs of NEPAD aimed at accelerating poverty reduction through the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, as well as ensuring sustainable development in a bid to reverse the marginalization of Africa in the global process. With all these mechanisms in place, it is hoped that the third generation of leaders in Africa will be able to reorganize space so that the benefits of globalization do not only accrue to a few, but to all and sundry. That will be the day when we will legitimately talk of African democracy, by Africans and for Africans; or **African solutions to African problems.**

But perhaps the most conspicuous achievement of our leaders in Africa has been their combined efforts to reduce the tempo of coups and counter coups since Africa’s despotic leaders are getting increasingly isolated. Our leaders’ resolve to hold regular elections, however imperfect, is something that cannot go unmentioned. Furthermore, international cooperation and solidarity are

increasing day by day, at least, on such global issues as terrorism, HIV/AIDS and poverty. But wholesale globalization should be embraced with a pinch of salt.

## V. Conclusion

One British pensioner once remarked:

**I cannot understand you Africans, so articulate, well educated and so good-hearted and yet you are so completely hopeless at running the affairs of your countries in a fairly decent manner. Can you tell me why?**

Africa has come from a long way: from the dark days of slavery to colonialism; from colonialism to the abhorrent system of apartheid; then from apartheid to post-colonial tyranny; and now from post-colonial tyranny to some level of democratization. We cannot presume to have succeeded in establishing a perfect democracy; nor can we claim that we have been able to reorganize space in a manner that significantly accelerates production and development. Since independence, our continent has been going through succession after succession of transition without arriving at its final destination of living at peace with itself, and of building a common home for its people. However, the situation is not as hopeless as our detractors would want us to believe.

Let us not forget that there was a time when our colonizing powers were playing football and having picnic in most parts of Africa. Africa is now fully liberated; courtesy to the defunct OAU. The African continent that had been dismembered by the Western and Eastern powers can now boast of several Regional Economic Communities such ECOWAS, IGAD, SADC, COMESA and the East African Community—all constituting building blocks for a geo-politically united Africa. And now here we are relishing the prospect of an East African Political Federation that will ensure large-scale production and optimum utilization of resources. The OAU that used to be an exclusive Club of dictators has now given birth to the African Union: a more qualitative, people-centered and more relevant organization to the problems of our time. African states are increasingly bowing to the winds of change by embracing some positive trends of globalization and democratic principles through electoral processes, as well as Africa's forthcoming "Democratic Charter" which condemns coups and corruption, and commits governments to promoting a free press, popular participation in democracy and transparency in government. All these are signs of fledging democracies that should not be glossed over. But one thing that calls for urgent attention by Africa's collective leadership is ensuring that the benefits of globalization are equitably shared among African nations and peoples.