

Visions of democracy



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"There has been no radical change in any Western government's mentality."

Dickson Eyoh

by David Bulengo

An outcry for democracy is erupting across Africa today. Already, we have seen multi-party elections held in Benin and Togo. The impact of this political shift on Africa — and the effect of global political changes on this political shift — is rarely discussed in the media.

Dickson Eyoh, the coordinator of African Studies at York University, says the struggles for democracy in Africa are a result of popular reaction to oppressive authoritarian states and the present economic crisis in Africa.

David Bulengo: What is the current political trend in Africa?

Dickson Eyoh: Going back to the late seventies, the landscape was one of a well-entrenched authoritarian one-party state with the odd mixture of military regimes.

Currently, we have seen the rise of the democracy movement.

How did this mass struggle for democracy originate?

One has to look at it historically. In a sense that this can be defined as the "second independence."

At the height of the African independence wave [during the 1960s] everyone was preoccupied with the issue of state-building. People soon realized that the benefits of independence were cruel. The economic crisis of the seventies and eighties and the structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund brought about various socio-economic problems which re-emphasized the call for democracy.

The struggle for democracy is not unified. There seem to be different groups with different concepts of democracy. Could you discuss this?

To simplify this enormously, there are two perspectives. To the right, people are argu-

ing that democracy implies the creation of institutions common to liberal democratic forms of government. This notion is closely affiliated with the ruling class and the promotion of capitalism as a mode of economic development.

To the left, people are arguing that liberalism is not the only form of democratic

expression. Instead, what they are looking for in democracy is accountability and representation which can be implemented through various institutional arrangements. Thus, the meaning of democracy here is first and foremost a process governed by internal forces and directed by popular forces in society.

Which concept is gaining more ground?

The liberal concept seems to be gaining more ground [than the left-wing populist concept] due to external pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the failure of deliverance from socialist regimes.

In what position does the New World Order put Africa?

Within the international framework I think Africa is going to be increasingly marginalized both economically and politically. One just needs to look at the response of Western governments to the former communist bloc in terms of the transfer of aid.

Do you think that the existing struggles will determine whether Africa becomes an appendage of another major power?

At this moment in time it is difficult to say. It all depends on how the world is going to be structured.

Are democracy and development compatible?

Democracy is not just a matter of voting and not voting. Democracy implies a whole range of things and it also provides a scope for people being involved in making choices about their lives and how to organize the economy and society. Therefore, I would argue that democracy is compatible with development and it opens up a higher

Africans have suffered heavily under the hands of corrupt and repressive governments. Can one predict that governments will now become more accountable to their people?

The new democratic struggles in Africa have clearly pointed out that Africans will no longer be passive victims of domination. Therefore, one can conclude by saying that the next generation of African leaders will have to behave differently from previous rulers.

Is tribalism a major concern among Africans involved with the struggle for democracy?

The concerns of tribalism amongst Africans are legitimate and are an integral part of the debate. To enter a debate without understanding the relationships and responsibilities of different communal groups is a mistake because the issue will not have been solved and will therefore continue to prevail.

Some Africans perceive a one-party rule as a protection against tribalism. How do you feel about this?

That is nonsense. This is an argument which has been used to rationalize authoritarian forms of government. Look at Kenya for instance. One-party states have ruled but the issue of tribalism still remains unsolved.

Considering the present social and economic difficulties in Africa, do you see the role of African intellectuals to be a significant part of the struggle?

It is difficult for me to generalize for all African scholars. In the current democratic debate, there is a significant role for African scholars. However, the present economic crisis is so intense that many intellectuals have remained captive to external models of thought and have therefore failed to generate an indigenous framework. Thus, it is necessary to note that those scholars involved in the debate need to move beyond this point and create a new autonomous framework which is suitable for Africa.

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potential for much more effective economic development.

For many years Western powers have backed repressive regimes in Africa. Why are they now supporting the struggle for democracy?

There has been no radical change in any Western government's mentality. The West has never really supported democracy in Africa. Their support for democracy in Africa is contingent on who they get into power. One need not even go to Africa to see this. Just look at the present situation in Haiti.