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Changing Patterns
of Politics in Africa

THE LAST DECADE AND A HALF in Africa's recent history have been marked by some dramatic and significant developments on the continent's political terrain. These developments have been as varied as they have been contradictory. They have also constituted a major source of challenge to political theory as different schools of thought grapple with them in terms of their weight and meaning. As can be imagined, there is no consensus on the most appropriate approach for interpreting the changes that are taking place in the structure, content and dynamics of African politics; indeed, efforts at conceptualizing the changes have produced a veritable Tower of Babel, with commentators not only speaking in different tongues but frequently past one another. The sense of confusion which is prevalent in the literature is indicative as much of the complexity of the changes themselves as of the crisis of theory in the study of Africa (Mkandawire, 1996; 2002; Zeleza, 1997; Mamdani, 1999). The contradictoriness of the changes, at once inspiring hope and generating despair, has polarized the scholarly and policy communities into Afro-optimist and Afro-pessimist camps. But for all the insights which they may offer into the problems and prospects of progressive change in Africa, both the Afro-pessimist and Afro-optimist frames are far too simplistic and subjective to serve as an enduring basis for capturing the dialectics of socio-political change and transformation. A more careful, historically-grounded interpretation of the changes occurring on the continent is, therefore needed, and for it to be useful, it should enable us to transcend the narrow and narrowing parameters that currently dominate the discourse on the processes and structures of change occurring in contemporary Africa.

Dimensions of political change in contemporary Africa

The changes that have taken place on the African political landscape over the last decade and a half have been multidimensional. They have occurred as much at the level of formal politics as in the arena of the informal processes that underpin the political system. They have been generated by factors internal to the political system and those external to it, necessitating a close attention to the contexts within which the changes are occurring. Furthermore, while domestic, local and national-level considerations are critical to the definition of the process of change, external factors and international actors also continue to play an important, even at some conjunctures determinant, role in shaping outcomes. Understandably, much of the attention which has been focused on political change in Africa has been concentrated on the formal institutions and procedures of politics, because these are both more visible and measurable. However, as is the case with politics elsewhere in the world, as important as institutions and procedures are, they do not tell the whole story in and of themselves. For this reason, it is important that attention be paid also to the processes that underpin and mould/remold formal institutions and procedures, including especially the actors and actresses whose actions –and inactions– give life to the political system. And this can be done without resort, as Chabal and Daloz (1999) do, to stereotyping African politics almost as a domain of *abracadabra* where the more one sees, the more mystified one becomes.

The main features of the changes in African politics occurred over the last 15 years that have attracted the most attention in the literature include the following.

The re-structuring of the terrain of political competition and governance: the decade of the 1990s in African history was ushered in with popular street protests or pressures, which in many cases culminated in concerted efforts at reforming the institutions and procedures of politics and governance. Among the most interesting developments occurred as part of this reform effort were: the convocation of sovereign national conferences in many Francophone and Lusophone African countries; widespread constitutional reforms that resulted either in the amendment of existing constitutions or the production of entirely new ones; the end of single party/military rule;

the restoration of multiparty politics and the organization of multiparty elections; the embrace of the notion of independent electoral commissions; the adoption of widespread electoral reforms, including mixed list and proportional representation systems; the achievement by a significant number of countries of a peaceful alternation of power between ruling parties and their opponents; and the organization of repeat elections that have been identified by some as a critical indicator of democratic consolidation. These changes were designed to open up the political space, and in so doing, allow for greater competition in the struggle for political power. The ambition was to create a level playing field for all political actors, make government more representative and accountable, allow for greater popular participation in national governance, and enrich the public space as an autonomous arena for the articulation of popular aspirations and/or the canvassing of policy and political alternatives (see Olukoshi, 1998, for further details). Afro-optimists have mostly concentrated their attention on the improved prospects for the continent around the re-structuring of the political terrain. Some early commentators were even to assess the changes in terms which spoke of a second liberation or an African renaissance. An Afro-barometer project (see <www.afrobarometer.org>) designed to capture the progressive changes occurring was also promoted. However, Afro-pessimists have in the main read the changes with skepticism, pointing to their shortcomings and the problems of democratic consolidation that persist.

The emergence of media pluralism: almost without exception, and as an integral part of the pressures for the opening up of the political space, the monopoly on media ownership exercised by the state was broken during the 1990s through the licensing by governments of private newspapers, radio stations (mostly FM stations) and television stations. Inroads were also made by digital satellite broadcasters and private Internet service providers. Apart from representing a radical departure from the situation previously prevailing, the development marked a new and important element in the promotion of political pluralism, governmental accountability, and popular participation (see Olukoshi, 1998; Fardon and Furniss, 2000; Hyden et al., 2002).

The efflorescence of associational life: during the course of the last one and a half decades, across Africa there has been a massive growth in the number and range of civil associations active in various spheres of life at the local, national, sub-regional and continental levels. Mostly set up as non-governmental organisations, they were seen by many as symbolizing the re-birth and vitality of civil society, and therefore as critical to the unfolding process of democratisation on the continent. Equally important, the civic associations were seen by some scholars as central to the emergence of new political actors in Africa –actors who, by the fact of their insertion in the civic arena, played the critical role of underwriting the African democratic transition and thus contributed to the dawn of a new era in the affairs of the continent (Chazan, 1982; 1983; Bratton, 1989; Diamond, 1994).

The demise of the last vestiges of colonial rule and institutionalized racism in Africa: the persistence of (settler) colonialism in the Southern part of Africa and the institutionalized racial discrimination that went with it constituted the most important challenge to African nationalism and its agenda of the total liberation of the continent from foreign domination. Beginning with the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980, and culminating in the 1994 national elections in which the black majority in South Africa participated for the first time, the end of colonial rule and the collapse of formal apartheid unleashed new political forces and possibilities in the countries concerned. Within Southern Africa and in the rest of Africa, the development also unleashed new processes and alliances. If there was a perception that the unfinished business of national liberation prevented African countries from giving full attention to the challenges of overcoming their underdevelopment and dependence, the end of colonial rule and apartheid was interpreted as marking the end of an important phase in the history of the continent, and the beginning of a new one in which concerns about African unity and development would pre-dominate.

The revival of regional cooperation and integration efforts: there was a marked increase, in the period from the beginning of the 1990s, in the tempo of activities designed to promote sub-regional cooperation and integration in Africa both as an important exercise in its own right and as a building block towards pan-African economic unity. At the same time, new efforts were made to strengthen continental-level governance, as evidenced, among other things, by the enabling of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, the outlawing by the defunct Organisation of African Unity (OAU) of the unlawful seizure of power and the exclusion from the counsels of the continental body of all governments installed other than by lawful means, the intensification of efforts at promoting pan-African conflict resolution

mechanisms/peace-keeping instruments, and the transformation of the OAU into a new African Union (AU) complete with a pan-African parliament, a pan-African judicial system, and a reinvigorated commission.

The changing nature of inter-state relations: African countries attained independence in the 1960s on the basis of the inviolability of the boundaries they inherited and strict non-interference in the internal affairs of one another. These principles were, by and large, respected for some 30 years. In the 1990s, however, they began to be seriously questioned and challenged in the wake of the crises that engulfed the Great Lakes region of the continent, which culminated in the invasion and occupation of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) by armies from several African countries. Armed conflicts in a number of other countries, most notably Liberia and Sierra Leone, further eroded the principle of non-interference, as sub-regional peacekeeping efforts were undertaken in the face of the actual or imminent collapse of central governmental authority. The position is now broadly established that governments involved in massive and gross violations are not entitled to enjoy the principle of non-interference in the affairs of their countries.

The politics of transitional justice: during the course of the 1990s, as part of the unfolding reform of political systems, various programmes were introduced to revisit the impact of the immediate authoritarian past with a view to establishing what had happened, who had responsibility, and what corrective measures could be taken in order to achieve national reconciliation. The first major experiment in this regard was undertaken in South Africa with its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). Various adaptations of the TRC model and/or principle were subsequently developed by several other countries, particularly those emerging from periods of violent conflict and prolonged military rule. There was also an experiment in Rwanda with the *Gatchacha* or community-based system of tackling and overcoming the legacy of the genocide which the country suffered.

An increased United Nations role in African governance: the context of the 1990s also featured new developments in the political system connected to an increase in the profile of the United Nations family of organisations in the domestic governance processes of African countries, particularly those emerging from protracted conflicts. There were various dimensions to this increased profile, but perhaps the most prominent are the international war crime tribunals that were established primarily on the ideology of discouraging impunity and sending a strong signal to political actors about the need to respect human rights and internationally established rules of conduct in situations of violent conflict and war.

The most evident and visible dimensions of change in African countries tell a substantial part of the story about the shifts that are occurring in the political systems of the countries of the continent. However, as far as they go, they only cover the obvious processes of change. Other less visible or measurable but nevertheless powerful dimensions of change which deserve to be factored into analyses, but which have not been sufficiently taken into account, include the fact that there have been significant demographic shifts in African countries which add up to project children and youths into a position of much greater prominence. With well over 50 per cent of the population of Africa made up of children and youths –a reason for which Africa is nowadays described as the "youngest" continent– a gradual but inevitable generational shift is occurring at several levels at the same time in the political system. The youth vote is perhaps the most important, easily recognised aspect of this development, but there is also the emergence into positions of leadership of a generation of politicians who did not directly experience colonial rule and were not directly part of the nationalist anti-colonial coalition. The implication of this shift for the agenda of politics is one area which remains under-researched beyond the early, self-serving references made in the late 1980s/early 1990s in some western foreign policy circles to the emergence of a new set of renaissance leaders in East Africa, the Horn, and Southern Africa. By contrast, the impact that youth alienation and disaffection –often connected to prolonged unemployment– could have on the stability of African polities has attracted the attention of scholars and policy intellectuals concerned with developing alternative interpretations of the conflicts that resulted in the collapse of central governmental authority in countries such as Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire. What is now referred to in some of the literature as the Youth Question in African politics constitutes an important dimension of change which addresses the core of the political system, including the process of constitution and renewal of citizenship, the social contract within which citizenship is articulated, the politics

of representation, and the legitimacy of government and state (Abdullah and Bangura, 1997; Abdullah, 2003; Mkandawire, 2002; Sesay, 2003).

Also critical to the changing frame of politics in Africa is the rapid rate of urbanisation taking place across the continent and the intensive internal population migration associated with it. As with the demographic shifts taking place, urbanisation and internal population flows would seem to be challenging many of the assumptions and structures on which post-colonial political governance was built. In addition to the obvious rural-urban reconfiguration that is occurring, there is also the growing politics of "settlers" and "natives", the revival of competing ethno-regional/socio-cultural networks, the proliferation of urban gangs/armed militias/neighborhood vigilante groups, the spread of intolerance and xenophobia which also finds expression in policies that are hostile to "non-natives", the increased challenges of social inclusion and service delivery for a rapidly growing urban population, the massive expansion of the boundaries of the informal sector and informal networks, and the spread of a new religiosity that ranges from the syncretic to the puritanical. The many different questions associated with the process of accelerated urbanisation have been refracted into the political system in the form of contestations around issues of citizenship, individual and group rights and entitlements, the role of the state and the nature of its political and policy capacities, the content and reach of social policy, the secular status of the state, and the entire spectrum of urban governance (Sesay, 2003; Mamdani, 2001; Mkandawire, 2002).

Post-independence politics in Africa was fashioned within the framework of the nationalist anti-colonial struggle that gathered steam in the period after the Second World War. The agenda of the anti-colonial nationalist coalition that ushered African countries into independence constituted the kernel of the social contract on the basis of which policy –political, economic and social– was developed. Almost without exception, a central role was reserved for the public sector in what has generally been described as the state-led or state interventionist post-colonial model of accumulation. It was a model of accumulation which came with its own structure of incentives –of rewards and penalties to which the players in the polity responded for much of the period it lasted, namely, the first two decades of independence. The collapse of the state interventionist model in the course of the 1980s and the efforts at replacing it with a "free" market-based framework also translated into the alteration of the incentives system in the polity. However, the impact of this development for the patterns of politics has not been seriously researched beyond the early efforts, which, heavily ideologically-driven by one-sided pro-market partisanship, were limited to suggestions that the market-based system would produce a new middle class that, drilled in the competitive ways of the market, would pioneer the African transition to a new era of (true liberal) democracy.

This perspective was connected to the view that the emergence of a vibrant civil society, defined as essential to sustainable democratisation, was the flipside of the free market system – as much as liberal democracy itself. The important question of the ways in which the collapse of the state-led model of development, the prolonged socio-economic crises which African countries have experienced, and the externally-driven efforts at market reform have produced a new incentive structure and redefined the normative boundaries of politics, remains insufficiently researched beyond anecdotal observations.

The various dimensions of change that have impacted on the pattern of politics in contemporary Africa have been the subject of competing interpretations to which we will return fully in this essay. The key point which is worth keeping in mind at this point is the fact that the dominant methodology that consists of seeking to establish a balance sheet of progress and regression has hardly been helpful in enabling students of contemporary African politics to capture the nuances of change. Often taken in isolation, rather than in their inter-connectedness, and frequently treated episodically rather than as part of a broader historical flow, the various elements of change are also routinely assessed without an adequate attention to the context within which they are unfolding. A first step towards redressing the prevalent analytical gaps in the study of contemporary Africa necessitates a discussion of the context within which political change is being fashioned and unfolded.

The context of political change

Irrespective of the interpretative weight which may be placed on the changes which have occurred on the African political landscape in the period since the onset of the 1980s, these changes have taken place in a context defined and characterized by:

- A prolonged economic crisis which African governments were encouraged or outrightly pressured to redress through an equally prolonged programme of orthodox International Monetary Fund (IMF)/World Bank structural adjustment that has already lasted over two decades, and which has failed to overcome the difficulties it was introduced to help with at the same time that it has created new complications of its own (Mkandawire and Olukoshi, 1995; Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999). Economic crisis and decline, the state of maladjustment of African economies, the expansion of the informal sector, and the erosion of domestic policy autonomy and capacities, represent a critical component of the context within which politics is being restructured in Africa.

- The end of the old East-West Cold War as it was once played out, a development symbolized by the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact, and the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). While it lasted, the Cold War had a major impact on the domestic politics of many African countries as the rival ideological blocs immersed themselves in the internal political dynamics of different countries in their quest to contain each other and retain/expand their spheres of influence. The end of the Cold War may not have meant the end of history or ideology, as was hastily suggested by some commentators; however, it altered an important geo-political factor around which a welter of strategies and interests had mushroomed in the domestic politics of African countries. Post-Cold War African politics involved a complex set of re-alignment of forces and interests, in ways that affected the pre-existing patterns of politics.

- The significant weakening of the African state by a combination of factors, not least among them the distinctly anti-state market reform agenda promoted by the IMF, the World Bank and other donors. That agenda had the consequence not only of delegitimizing the state as an actor in the political economy, but also of eroding its capacities through a series of retrenchment measures that also served to fuel the brain drain, facilitate the erosion of the domestic policy system, and reduce Africa to the most under-governed region of the world. Given the central role that the African state assumed in every facet of the post-colonial political economy, the institutional decline and decay to which it was exposed represented a major development, which reverberated in all spheres of life –the economic, the socio-cultural and the political (Mkandawire and Olukoshi, 1995; Mkandawire and Soludo, 1999). The politics of filling the voids created by state retrenchment, delegitimation and decay has been at the heart of some of the changes that have occurred over the last decade and a half or more, including the emergence of new actors/actresses of various kinds with competing/conflicting projects.

- The widespread resort to violence and arms in managing domestic political conflicts or demonstrating disaffection. Connected to the end of the East-West Cold War and the retrenchment of the state in a manner which hobbled it, Africa witnessed the emergence/resurgence of conflicts, mostly of an intra-state type kind and with varying degrees of intensity. Some of the conflicts were carried over from the Cold War period, while others derived from grievances arising from other sources. The most spectacular and tragic of the conflicts had genocidal dimensions, while in many cases there was also the collapse of central governmental authority. Furthermore, in what some commentators presented as evidence of a new genre of wars, the conflicts departed from the traditional patterns in which professional armies were pitched against each other. Instead, armed civilian groups took on others and/or heavily factionalized professional armies. Also, the widespread recruitment and deployment of child soldiers represented another unique aspect of the conflicts, as did the terror and mayhem which was visited on unarmed civilian populations, especially in the rural areas. Lacking in ideological clarity or an alternative social project, these wars were easily dismissed by many as amounting to banditry at the interface of greed and grievance; in fact, they spoke a much more profound change associated with the emergence into political significance of a disaffected urban youth (Abdullah and Bangura, 1997; Abdullah, 2003; Mkandawire, 2002; Mamdani, 2001; Sesay, 2003).

- The emergence of a Diaspora of recent migrants from Africa also constitutes an important contextual factor, which is growing in significance as the new Diaspora grows in influence as a constituency whose influence is refracted back into the domestic political processes unfolding in different countries. The process of the constitution of this new Diaspora is recent and still on-going, as a wave of professionals, many of them still in their prime, migrate for a variety of reasons to Europe and North America at the same time that many who left temporarily to study abroad also choose to stay away. Their weight in lobbying around issues of political reform and human rights in their host countries is growing, and their voice in the affairs of their home countries reverberates among some important constituencies. It is a mark of their growing influence that formal recognition has been conferred on them by the African Union.

Dominant themes in the study of political change in Africa

The main contextual factors that have shaped the content and practice of politics in contemporary Africa also provide pointers to the themes that have preoccupied students of the process of change on the continent over the last decade and half. These themes vary in their details, but they can be summarised as including the following broad issues:

- Transition and electoral politics, including party and electoral systems, programmes promoted by political parties, the process of electioneering, the quality of access to the media enjoyed by the competing parties, the legislative structure adopted, voter education and turnout, and judicial independence.

- The problems and prospects of democratic consolidation on the basis of various competing frameworks for assessing and measuring the African transition.

- Constitutionalism and constitutional reform, encompassing the basic rights of citizenry, separation of powers, administrative decentralization, and political succession.

- The emergence, significance and role of an African civil society in the process of democratization.

- The nature of state politics, the dynamics of state-society relations, and the challenges of governance facing African countries.

- The causes, dimensions and consequences of contemporary African conflicts.

- The political economy of reform in Africa, with particular emphasis on the interface between market reforms and political liberalisation, "good" governance, and public sector reforms.

Easily, the bulk of the literature produced on African politics over the last decade and a half is focused on these broad themes. While the commonality of issues covered might suggest a convergence on the critical markers of change in African political systems, in reality there is diversity in the interpretative frames employed for reaching conclusions about the direction of politics. It is to these competing interpretations to which we now turn attention.

Interpreting political change in Africa

Of the various competing interpretations of the content, context and dynamics of political change in Africa, by far the most influential is the so-called new political economy/public choice approach which incorporates different shades of theories of patrimonialism/neo-patrimonialism, state criminalisation and post-colony (Bates, 1981; Jackson and Roseburg, 1983; Callaghy, 1984; Kasfir, 1984; Young and Turner, 1985; Ergas, 1987; Chabal, 1988; Rothchild and Chazan, 1988; Carter Centre, 1989a; 1989b; Bayart, 1993; Bratton and van der Walle, 1994; Reno, 1995; Bayart et al., 1999; Mbembe, 1992a; 1992b). Depending on the particular angle or entry point they choose, scholars working within this broad approach have tended to pitch themselves into an interpretative frame that is either optimistic or pessimistic about the patterns of politics in Africa, their problems and prospects. The literature demonstrates a wide spectrum of opinion, but the main issues that have emerged to constitute the dominant approach to interpreting African politics and the changes taking place within it can be illustrated with the discussion that has taken place on the socio-economic context of political change and the nature of civil society.

With regard to the socio-economic context of political change, by far the most dominant perspective is that rent-seeking behavioural patterns among political actors and neo-patrimonial pressures produced the decline in African economies, obstructed the full realisation of the goals of IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programmes, nurtures a culture of informality/conviviality, and prevents the emergence of reform-minded coalitions able to initiate and govern far-reaching change in the form of economic and political liberalisation. For some of the contributors to the development of this perspective, rent-seeking is integral to the very nature of African culture and/or society, while for others the political/policy elite are the self-conscious producers of niches of opportunity which they exploit. Some of the rent-seeking niches are also held to arise from the nature of African economies, which have been structured within a state-interventionist model of development that allocates an important role to the exercise of policy discretion, facilitates oligopolistic practices, and discourages the emergence of market-driven pricing regimes. As to the neo-patrimonialist pressures that are considered to be a pervasive, all-encompassing feature of African polities, some of the contributors to the development of this perspective locate the pressures at the level of African society itself, while others place the emphasis on the internal workings of the state system. The society-centric approach, best illustrated by Bayart's notion of the politics of the belly, points to practices and norms in African society that prevent the embrace and sustained application of "rational" policy choices capable of promoting economic development and political liberalisation. By contrast, the state-centric approach locates the problem of neo-patrimonialism not in the society but in the state itself, pointing to the ways in which the state constitutes a burden on society on account of the politics of predation which it nurtures. In this connection, various theses of the shadow state or the state within the state have been advanced. Neo-patrimonialist pressures are also fuelled by the insatiable craving of the power elite for popular legitimacy. For this reason, layers and networks of patron-clientelism pervade the entire socio-economic and political system.

Irrespective of the particular point of view taken by different authors on the sources of rent-seeking and neo-patrimonialism, there is widespread agreement among them that Africa's economic development and political transition from authoritarian rule have been stymied and obstructed. The intellectual roots of Afro-pessimism can be traced to this perspective insofar as it represents a frame which, in treating rent-seeking behaviours, neo-patrimonialist practices and post-colony syndromes as ubiquitous and all-pervasive, almost sees no way out of the "dead end" to African development. For, if existing policy frames have failed because of the adverse consequences of the logic of rent-seeking, the economy of affection, the politics of the post-colony, and neo-patrimonialism, reform efforts have also foundered for the same reasons. It was partly in a bid to overcome the pessimism that is the logical outcome of this perspective, that Chabal and Daloz (1999) suggested that the way things are in Africa as captured in the critique of the rent-seeking/neo-patrimonialist school should be accepted as the way Africa really works –in contradistinction to the orderliness in-built into Western state-society relations and structures. Although their intervention was presented as a departure from a euro-centric reading of Africa at work, it did not in fact succeed in going beyond the euro-centrism that was the object of their criticism, and in the end, their prognosis was also overwhelmed by a sense of pessimism.

Those who –while still working within the rent-seeking/neo-patrimonialist framework– seek sources of hope and optimism, have had to turn to the an earlier generation of writings which saw in the orthodox economic reform efforts promoted by the IMF and the World Bank the possibility of the emergence of new patterns of politics in Africa that are allegedly more promoting of rational economic development and political renewal (Chazan, 1982; 1983; Diamond, 1994; Bates, 1981; Nelson, 1990). The arguments that have been marshalled in this regard are varied, but they frequently include the expectation that economic structural adjustment will produce or is producing a new bourgeoisie that is rooted in production and disciplined in the ways of the market so as to be in a position to mid-wife a genuine democratic transition in Africa. Others have suggested that the market reform process has empowered a new generation of technocrats who have become important players not only with regard to the struggle for the rational governance of economies, but also the restructuring of the parameters of politics. Furthermore, it has been suggested that the expectation that economic reforms will alter the structure of incentives in favor of rural Africa will not only increase the political weight of the rural populace in the national power equation of African countries, but also throw up new grassroots players who can serve as the voice of the people. Attention has also been payed to the changing patterns of interest group politics, especially the contestation between so-called

pro-reform (that is, pro-market reform) groups and anti-reform coalitions (often assumed to be people fully immersed in the rent-seeking/neo-patrimonialist logic of the post-colony), and the new patterns of politics which they are producing in the quest for rational economic development and political liberalisation.

When it comes to the question of the African civil society, a theme to which a considerable amount of literature has been devoted, the polarisation between the Afro-pessimists and Afro-optimists is equally in evidence (Chazan, 1983). While the bulk of the literature notes the expansion occurred in the course of the 1980s and 1990s in African associational life, the extent to which civil society represents a new, important arena or vector of politics is very much in contention. Some scholars contest the relevance of the concept of civil society to an African context that is still dominated by primordial ties and networks, while others point to the "uncivil" nature of African civil society, the dominance of a statist logic within it, and the proliferation of neo-patrimonialist relations that add up to limit its democratising potential. Others, however, take a more favorable view of African civil society, affirming the relevance/applicability of the concept to the African setting and suggesting that a process of socio-political renewal is underway across the continent that is underwritten by the principal civil society players. Furthermore, civil society, defined primarily in terms of an associational life that is autonomous of the state, is presented as evidence of the emergence of a new non-statist type of politics, with the leaders of the civic associations becoming the standard-bearers of the struggle for a democratic renewal that is anchored in the promotion of pluralism, secularism, civic duties, civil liberties/human rights, and the accountability of public office holders.

Pitfalls of the dominant interpretative frames

Although the dominant rent-seeking/neo-patrimonialist framework which includes most of the efforts at interpreting political change in Africa may have offered some insights into problems of political reform and transition on the continent, it is replete with weaknesses which limit its utility for capturing the nuances of change (Mamdani, 1999; Zeleza, 1997; Mkandawire, 1996; Makandawire and Olukoshi, 1995). These weaknesses are, in part, internal to the framework itself, including the fact that it has been deployed to serve as a universally valid explanation for just about anything and everything, thereby ultimately losing its analytic value and precision. Other weaknesses of the framework derive from the manner of structuring and the methodological approaches of mainstream African Studies, which consist of:

- A continuing treatment of Africa and African politics as an exotic terrain that is replete with surprises, the bizarre and the Byzantine, and which pre-disposes students to sensationalism, exaggeration, condescension and even contempt in the way they handle the subjects of their research. It is little wonder that this approach has frequently resulted in the generation of the most inappropriate of notions about Africa, notions that, in the worst cases, are reminiscent of racist colonial anthropological approaches to understanding and characterising the "other".

- The construction and application of standards of assessment and measurement which tend to stereotype, in the African setting, practices and experiences which elsewhere are treated as routine, normal, or an exceptional aberration that is not worthy of special attention. The consequence is that in discussions about African politics, an excessive sense of *déjà vu* tends to predominate, thereby diminishing the struggles for change that take place, or minimizing the dimensions of change that does occur.

- A persistent reading of African historical experiences using the lenses of the histories and experiences of other peoples and regions of the world in what some scholars, at an earlier phase of debates on the methodology of African Studies, described as a heavily euro-centric unilinear evolutionism that holds that whatever Africa may be experiencing presently is little more than a replay of a similar phase in a much earlier period in the history of Europe or the West. By the same logic, Africa's future is seen as sensible and valid only if it is modelled along the lines of the political institutions of European countries. In consequence, attention to the specificity of the African context and historical experience, and the challenges for creativity and originality which they present, are lost in the analysis which is produced. In failing to assess African politics, economy and society on their own terms as distinct from the terms emanating from the history of others, unilinear evolutionism has served as an

instrument for a search, wittingly or unwittingly, for uniformity and conformity; it has not served the cause of diversity and universality.

- The unrealistic application of the principles of orthodox economics to the analysis of African politics, in an approach which also places a great deal of emphasis on quantitative measurements to the detriment of qualitative analyses. This problem is reflective, in part at least, of a movement within the discipline of political science to mimic the discipline of economics at a time when the latter is enjoying a hegemonic position in the social sciences and the orthodox stream within the discipline is on the ascendancy. The result has been that formulaic correlations are being applied to the study of Africa which are both diversionary and fail to capture the nuances of political change on the continent.

- The continuing analysis of African politics, economy and society on the basis of binary oppositions that separate and treat as distinct the formal and the informal, the private and the public, the state and the market, the rural and the urban, and the state and (civil) society. Yet, such rigid compartmentalisations are hardly useful for understanding the logic of politics in a setting where most actors/actresses straddle the distinct boxes on the basis of which an effort is made to understand them. Where attempts have been made to overcome this weakness, they have often produced outcomes that either attribute failure to the fact of straddling, or caricature straddling as one of the features of the exotic nature of African politics.

- The outright denial or complete neglect of the existence of a political community in Africa that is characterised by diversity, contestation, sacrifice and visions of a better society. The rent-seeking/neo-patrimonialist discourse on Africa is carried out as though all Africans are collectively and uniformly immersed in that logic, with all actions, including those that simply happen by chance or which are the products of particular conjunctures, treated as the results of premeditated, self-serving neo-patrimonial calculations. This approach obviously limits the capacity of students to pay serious attention to the struggles that give meaning to politics in contemporary Africa and which propel the process of change.

In addition to the weaknesses of the rent-seeking/neo-patrimonialist framework for understanding the changing patterns of African politics, the perspectives that it has generated have not been helpful in grasping the complexities of change on the continent. In this connection, the debate between the Afro-optimists and Afro-pessimists, characterized as it is by a host of subjectivities, has tended to be diversionary insofar as social progress is a contradictory process distinguished by setbacks, stalemates, and advances in a process which is not unilinear or unidirectional. The dialectic of decomposition and recomposition as a fact of human society is one that has been factored out of the Afro-pessimist/Afro-optimist debate, and the ideals against which positions are taken either to be upbeat or downbeat about the prospects for Africa are mostly the products of a wishful thinking that does not correspond to any known historical experience. Where such ideals are abandoned, an excessive realism is brought into play by an all-round lowering of standards, which is encouraged in a manner that suggests that not much more can be expected from Africa. But, in fact, people in Africa also dream dreams, have visions of a greater tomorrow, and want to hold themselves and their governments to the highest standards of performance. It is only when this simple fact is fully appreciated that we can properly begin to grapple with the dialectic of change in contemporary African politics without being trapped by the Afro-pessimist/Afro-optimist divide.

Elements for an alternative interpretation of political change in Africa

In seeking alternative interpretative frames for understanding the new patterns of politics in Africa, it is important, as a starting point, to keep in mind that change is a continuous process. Change is also not always radical –indeed, in most cases, it is gradual, often incomplete, certainly far from being total, and is sometimes even imperceptible but nevertheless occurring. It is precisely because of the permanence of change that much of the processes integral to politics, economy and society across the world constitute pieces of work in progress, arenas where –be it the management of diversity, the construction of the state, the negotiation of citizenship, etc.– the best models which are available or which correspond to the social equilibrium of the moment still represent, in a historical perspective, an unfinished business.

That is why, wherever there is change, elements of continuity also abound. Change unfolds more often than not in the womb of one form or another of continuity. The forces that serve as the bearers of change are the makers of history, but they may sometimes be immersed enough in the tasks at hand or the demands of the moment as not to be fully aware of the epoch-making nature of their actions or omissions. In other words, change is not always the product of a consciously defined project, and even where an element of deliberation and planning is involved, outcomes are not as predictable as might be imagined. What all of this calls for is a historical perspective and methodology which is able to locate isolated events and episodes in their proper place in the flow of a welter of events. Only such an approach can enable us to fully grasp the significance of change that is occurring and to develop a process based on an understanding of history. As noted earlier, the process of change is, by definition, a contradictory one; assessing the process cannot be helped by intellectual swings from pessimism to optimism and back according to the pressures and contradictions thrown up at different moments.

African politics, as indeed politics elsewhere in the world, are in a permanent state of evolution. The current phase of the process of change in the politics of the continent is by definition contradictory and far from being unilinear or unidirectional. Indeed, considering that it is a process of change that is occurring at a time of massive decomposition and recomposition of social relations, it can be rightly argued that the continent is in a state of flux that is, at once, both confusing and ordered –often an admixture of both at the same time. The immediate context of the change that is taking place can be located in the collapse at the end of the 1970s/beginning of the 1980s of the post-colonial framework of accumulation on the basis of which various players within the polity constituted themselves and/or were constituted. It was a framework in which the state took a frontline role in the key socio-economic and political processes of the polity; it was also organic to the social contract on the basis of which the nationalist anti-colonial coalition that ushered African countries to independence was constructed. Furthermore, it was critical to the intensive recomposition of social relations and politics that included the acceleration of the process of class formation and class differentiation. The ideological slogan that underpinned the framework was that of nation-building. Governments, therefore, invested heavily in the promotion of national unity, although in most cases ethno-regional identities remained strong and overlapped with class and religious identities.

The reasons for the collapse of the post-colonial model of accumulation are already too well established in the literature to bear repeating here. What is important to note for now is that the collapse of the framework produced a rupture that called for a re-definition of state-society relations, as well as relations within society and the state themselves. The quest for this all-round definition of relations was inevitably tied to the competition for re-positioning by the various contending interests in the political system and the struggle for power, opportunity and advantage among them. In this struggle, all the resources that are critical to the acquisition and retention of power have been mobilised, whether these be class-based or simply ethnic, religious and regional. The struggle also served as the context for critical stocktaking as manifested in the (sovereign) national conferences that were convened, the constitutional review exercises that took place, and the truth and reconciliation exercises that were launched.

These different activities provided the occasion for the discontents of the post-colonial framework of accumulation and the politics that corresponded to them to be played out in the open. Their outcome, almost uniformly, comprised the formal abandonment of the authoritarian political systems, hitherto established in the form of single-party or military rule, and/or a military-civilian diarchy. In place of the old systems of political governance, multiparty regimes were introduced almost as the new complement of the economic liberalisation exercises associated with the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment programmes that were introduced at the onset of the crisis of the post-colonial model of accumulation.

If the crisis of the post-colonial model of accumulation translated into a crisis for the established political order in most African countries, the struggle for the preservation of interests became an important feature of the transition from political authoritarianism to political liberalisation, a struggle made all the more critical for the key social players by the continuing environment of prolonged economic crises and structural adjustment that under-girded the transition. A process of re-alignment of interests was also launched, including the forging of new identities and alliances. In this process –and in a classic demonstration of the dialectics of

change and continuity– yesterday's single-party barons and military oligarchs became part of the movement for political pluralism and the expansion of the public space, by setting up or taking an active role in new political parties, non-governmental organisations, the religious associations that proliferated, and the numerous ethno-regional networks that were revived. Similarly, popular social movements, including trade unions, rediscovered their voices in the framework of the political liberalisation process. The inter-generational politics that mushroomed around the collapse of the post-colonial model of accumulation and the deep-seated socio-economic crises associated with it also threw up various youth groups and associations which openly staked claims on power and resources in the name of a younger generation of Africans. Their campaigns were bolstered by the demographic shifts that had occurred in Africa in favor of the younger generation. Women's groups also joined in the politics of voice and alliance-building in a bid to secure a better representation in the evolving new political system. As the old middle class that was nurtured in the framework of the post-colonial model of accumulation saw its ranks thinned out and gradually faded into decline, a new middle class thrown up by the market liberalisation reforms that were introduced began to emerge as part of a broader process of social recomposition and transformation. In the politics of re-alignment that were unleashed, no sector of society was left untouched, and the massive mobilisation that was embarked upon by the forces of change and the vested interests which remained around the *ancien régime* constituted the stuff of which transitional politics was made in the 1990s. That period was also easily one of the more exciting in post-independence African politics, prompting some to suggest, rather hastily and prematurely, that the continent was in the throes of a second liberation.

Amidst the politics of change associated with the end of the post-colonial model of development and the search for a new model, a new social equilibrium seemed to be in the making. But it was one whose emergence, in many parts of Africa, was both tortured and conflicted-ridden, sometimes taking on unimaginably violent dimensions. Part of the reason for this is the heightened uncertainty that was associated with the transitional process as the political liberalisation project was born in the context of the most prolonged and deep-seated socio-economic crises in the contemporary history of the continent. This state of uncertainty was heightened by a severe loss of confidence in the public institutions of government, especially in terms of their capacity to respond to basic citizen needs. Matters were not helped in this regard by the fact that the state, which once played a pivotal role in the polity, had, thanks to the single-minded anti-statism of IMF/World Bank structural adjustment, been weakened, hobbled and reduced to a shadow of itself. And yet, with the context of economic decline and structural adjustment having equally undermined and weakened a broad cross-section of social groups, the state, even in its situation of decline, still remained an important point of focus in the articulation of livelihood strategies, the (re)definition of interests and the promotion of alternative social projects. This was as true for groups that were closely connected to the post-colonial model of development –and many of which were hardest hit by the collapse of the framework– as for those that were generally less inserted into a state-led developmentalism. It is also true for the emerging new interests thrown up by the market reform process. It is for this reason that the politics of transition have been characterised by an admixture of resistance, adaptation, alliance-building and transformation.

The transition in African politics is also taking place at a time of expansion of the boundaries of informalisation. On account of the prolonged economic crises to which African countries were exposed, many formal processes and institutions went into decline and decay. Informal sector activities were boosted by the adoption of multiple modes of livelihood by the working poor and the erstwhile middle class. The intensification of the process of urbanisation also added to the pressures for the expansion of the informal sector. With the extension of the coverage and reach of the informal sector went the intensification of straddling with all the accompanying implications. Furthermore, the social reshuffling that is still underway in most countries produces both an element of ad hocism in the actions of interest groups and an unusual rapidity in the turnover of alliances. For these reasons, transitional politics have not associated with sharp ideological cleavages, even if the contestation for power has been intense and a range of critical issues centering on the restructuring of the state and state-society relations are being articulated in the public domain. If anything, the pursuit of multiple modes of livelihood within the context of an expanding informal sector has contributed to the emergence and/or revival of "traditional" social networks and a generalised religious fervor.

Concluding remarks

Overall, the transitional process has registered important new shifts in African politics which ought to be acknowledged for their significance in Africa's post-independence history. Of these shifts, perhaps the most important are the embrace by most of the key players of a multi-party liberal constitutional framework for managing political competition, the expansion and pluralisation of the public space, the open discussion of strategies for governing national diversities, and the emergence into prominence of non-state actors. But these changes have also been tempered by the deepening socio-economic inequalities occurring in most countries, the continuing toll exacted by the prolonged economic crises on the continent, the narrowing of opportunities for social advancement by the deflationary macro-economic framework promoted by the international financial institutions, the stagnation of national economies, and the continuing incapacitation of the state as a public institution. With the investments which have been made by various groups in the project of democratic reform failing to yield some of the socio-economic dividends that could have been expected, it should not be surprising that across Africa the citizenship question has emerged as perhaps the single most important issue around which the struggle for change has crystallized. Within this broad question, the issue of youth disaffection has come to the fore. It is a question that speaks to the fact that although the old, post-colonial model of accumulation and the social contract that was built on it may have exhausted themselves, the new market-based model of development whose basic blueprints were laid in the structural adjustment model of the IMF and the World Bank, amidst popular opposition, is yet to serve as an acceptable or workable framework for the constitution of a new social contract. The question which arises now is that, given the failure of two decades of structural adjustment to stem the decline in African economies (indeed, the adjustment programme became part and parcel of the dynamics of the continent's economic crises), is it capable of being a basis for the construction of a new social contract, or must the continent now simply count the costs of its maladjustment and develop an alternative framework for its development? This is both a research and policy question, and it is one which scholars like Mkandawire have recently been addressing through their arguments for a project of developmental democracy as a framework for restoring Africa to a path of economic growth that is also by definition socially inclusive and democratic. It is an issue to which students should be encouraged to pay closer attention through the investment of theoretical and empirical effort, in the hope that such an investment can enable us to go beyond the morass into which African Studies find themselves.

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