

International Institute for Justice and Development



International Conference on the State of Affairs of Africa (ICSAA)

October 26th, 27th, and 28th of 2006

A View of Democratic Governance in Africa with the Sudan in mind

Paper presented by
Dr. Richard A. LOBBAN, Jr.
Chair, Anthropology Department Rhode Island College
Executive Director, Sudan Studies Association

First International Conference on the State of Affairs of Africa

©IIJD, Inc. 2006

I. Introduction

First let me express my gratitude to the conference organizers for this important conference sponsored by the International Institute for Justice and Development and for this opportunity to address this audience. This paper surveys some of the history of traditional systems of African governance and how they were derailed and damaged by colonialism. This conference will certainly contribute to the recovery process of African governance by exploring some of the steps that can be taken to restore African democracy and local grassroots governance. This is a matter that is both difficult and very urgent.

There is a deep tradition of pro-colonial democracy at the village level in horticultural societies in particular where mechanisms of local level consultation, mediation and conflict resolution were widespread and functioned smoothly. Although colonial administrations projected themselves as being on a 'civilizing mission' with a self-proclaimed need to 'pacify the natives.' The fact was that colonialism was violently opposed and the lesson to be learned by 'the natives' was that 'might makes right' and that grassroots populist democracy was a threat to the oppressor. There was really nothing that was fundamentally democratic in imposed foreign rule that sought to celebrate its own sentiments of nationalist and imperial grandeur while exploiting African resources, compelling Africans to toil under burdensome taxes and obligations and denying expressions of basic freedoms and human rights. Amazingly, this obvious fact of injustice sometimes passes for the roots of modern African democracy. It was the genuine democracy of African mass action in demonstrations, petitions, and even armed resistance that finally was mobilized against colonialism that was the much more proud manifestation of democracy.

Sadly, many post-colonial governments could not think out of the colonial "box" and they applied the colonial lessons thinking that military rule was appropriate and repression of fellow citizens was justifiable on the path of development. The record is now painfully clear, the military in power makes more problems than it solves and the suppression of basic freedoms and human rights causes brain drain, economic or political refugees, and diverts developments goals and resources.

Clearly Africa has an immense diversity in languages and ethnicities so it is reasonable to discover great variation of political systems too. They can range from fully egalitarian, to redistributive chieftains, or other equitable political systems to tyrannical kingdoms, regional states and substantial empires from the most ancient and medieval periods right down to the present. No single description can characterize all of this diversity. However, most of these political systems were suppressed, derailed, transformed, distorted and manipulated by the superimposition of system of colonial rule whether by Direct or Indirect administrative policies employed by colonialists.

Africa is still in the recovery mode from colonialism not to mention the complex demographic, moral and legal legacies of the prior centuries of slave raiding and trading.

It is also important to note that while there are some very serious conflicts and issues in Africa today, perhaps part of our human condition, most African nations are more or less democratic today, at least in form, even if not fully functional. In fact, some African nations have vibrant multi-party democracies by any standard. Formal colonial rule and white supremacy have been brought to an official end. In some cases the struggle to end racist and colonial relations was only recently concluded. Africa is now fully decolonized at least in terms of foreign flags flying over the motherland of humanity. Yet, some lingering colonial and neo-colonial attitudes still need further reflection and restructuring.

Probably as long as the avenues for peaceful protest are blocked, the expression of democracy may likely be violent with revolutionary sentiments and practices of resistance to marginalization and subordination by ethnicity, religion, class, gender, or other conflicting models of identity. Needless to say empowerment by violence is not to be recommended, but it can certainly be understood in context where alternatives are not present. Tragically, episodic conflicts are not so uncommon in modern Africa. The list a bloodied places can include eastern Congo, Nigeria, the Lakes Region, the Horn, Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, Rwanda, Liberia, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone and other lands as well. Following a brief survey I will then turn to some specifics of the situation in Sudan including both the peace in the "Comprehensive" Peace Agreement between the North and the South, but also the very alarming issues in Darfur that are presently unfolding along with sporadic urban protests and the conflict in the eastern Sudan that are not resolved.

II. African Inheritance of Traditional Models of Governance

Since time immemorial Africa has implemented many fundamental elements of grassroots democracy. This is especially seen in egalitarian bands that were distributed across the continent, in fact, across the globe until systems of centralized power based on agriculture and domestic animals began to erode them. Even the models known by the Latin expression *primus inter pares* (or first among equals) were extremely widespread on the African continent. Such models were at the foundation of councils of elders, or even in early Islam with the *Shura* councils that found their legitimacy upon the consent of the government and by mediated consultation until a consensus was finally reached. Even in pre-literate contexts it is clear that there were informal "laws" of precedence, guidance by parables, oracular consultation, informal "police" systems with age-grades and masked groups such as the *poro* societies in parts of West Africa.

Rulers who did not look after the reasonable expectations from his or even her subjects for redistribution were not long on their stools. The common understanding that leaders had divine legitimacy and carried the spirit of their peoples, lands and livestock meant a great seriousness in consideration of evidence in disputes and in dispensing equitable justice.

On the other hand The African traditions of governance include elements of potential or real despotism in ancient, medieval and pre-colonial times. We should not have any mythologies that Africa of these times was in some idyllic place and moment where class cleavages, slavery and exploitation did not exist. Even the glorious, but imperial, states of Ghana, Tekrur, Mali, and Songhai across the Sahel had their class contradictions and social injustice, especially if they were in their conquest modes. Traditional modes of African slavery might have some favorable points of comparison with the sustained and brutal Atlantic or trans-Saharan trade, but they were still arbitrary and alienating with the collaboration of some autocratic and brutal monarchs.

The record is clear in these respects and there was certainly abuse in some case of divine kingship and in narrow institutions of dynastic succession and endogamous elites. The point here is that this did not differentiate Africa from the rest of the world in these respects. Africa was pretty much typical and we need to take the good and the problematic in Africa's past systems of governance. There is a very rich and complex inheritance for human and democratic interaction found in the annals of African history and there is an inheritance of anti-democratic traditions in Africa as well.

However, it was largely the case that the positive, humane and equitable traditions were more often suppressed or suspended under colonialism, especially in local level grassroots governance. It was often the negative and sometimes ruthless traditions that were reinforced to serve to corrupt and challenge traditional practices supporting European interests and the colonial practices that used traditional undemocratic hierarchy as an instrument of colonial rule.

III. The Colonial Era in Africa

Africans became involuntary witnesses and victims to the uninvited and unwelcome occupiers of their continent. They resisted when the true colonial mission was understood. Cases of heroic and stubborn struggle are well known for the Mahdi of Sudan, western savanna *jihads*, the Ashanti of Ghana, the kings of Ethiopia, the Zulu of South Africa, the MauMau of Kenya, and parallels in Egypt, and Algeria just to mention a few. But finally colonial partition carved their territory into pieces that were machine-gunned and cannonaded into 'pacified' hunks that demarcated "effective control" with graves and gallows in the sustained military programs to 'exterminate the brutes.' Exploitation through forced labor and coercive taxation by European powers was

masked by a supposed 'civilizing' mission and the supposed the 'White Man's burden' that Europeans picked up with paternalistic reluctance. This is not a pleasant chapter, but it needs frank exploration to grasp the predicament of modern Africa as well as the perception that if Europeans are coming again, great caution is required. It would be difficult to find the roots of democracy and African development in these chapters.

The colonial experience was ideologically lubricated with complex forms of racism and arrogance that denigrated African culture and history and subordinated 'Africanity' to European national chauvinism that could only be built on African self-denial and wearing Black Skins covered by White masks. But like all contradictions, the European military conquest of the continent and the needs for African troops in World Wars I and II also pointed in a new direction for Africans heading toward their own acquisition of military skills, and national ambitions. Even the colonial needs for a trained and literate civil service did contain the seeds that would undo colonial dominance. If pan-Europeanism was a major source of the problem, then Africans could conclude that Pan-Africanism was necessarily part of the solution. This is still in process from the days of WEB DuBois, George Padmore, Duse Mohamed and Marcus Garvey and on to Kwame Nkrumah, Gamal 'abd al-Nasser, Jomo Kenyatta, Eduardo Mondlane and Amilcar Cabral on to the OAU and the rise of the AU today. By the way, if you don't know these names it is time to find out!

The more the intellectuals were suppressed; imprisoned, assassinated, and executed the more they became galvanizing heroes and a spiritual force to carry on with the struggles of the day. Now, a damaged Africa *IS* getting its act together as ECOMAG forces in West Africa have proven and regional association are starting to find points of common alliance rather than colonial division. Likewise with the colonial needs for primary production and manufacture, communications, teachers, clerical workers, and transportation workers the modern African working class would not have evolved in the way it has. And when they became aware that they were essential and crucial for colonialism to survive it was these workers and organized farmers who could ultimately sow the seeds of colonial destruction

Can we possibly expect that the gravely dysfunctional colonial experience could not have led to a continent-wide Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder? The 700-pound gorilla in this case was that, in the guise of bringing "civilization" to Africa colonialism ushered in one of the most brutal and fundamentally undemocratic occupations one might imagine where your traditions, kinship, language and economies were all savagely undermined. The internal boundaries of Africa arbitrarily slashed the African continent into small managerial parts and the age-old imperial approach of 'divide and rule' was employed with surgical precision for the reasons for colonial vanity, domination and the exploitation of its labor and natural resources. Should we wonder

why African unity is hard to achieve?

So, one may say that colonialism was broadly undemocratic in its mission and practice and it was militarily imposed to block, compromise, or corrupt the democratic upsurge and interests of the vast majorities of African peoples. Colonialists lived in fear of one person-one vote and found clever or brutal ways and ideologies to be sure it could be thwarted. Yes, buried within this dialectical relationship with colonialism were self-interested African political parties, popular resistance in various forms, mass mobilization and broad democracy Africans were struggling to regain the track of their own history and move toward an accountable, transparent and legitimate system of rule and rulers. When this converged at a time of European weakness in the immediate wake of World War II and one by one for thirty years Africa again started to take control of its own destiny. As the layers of colonial values were peeled away and set aside, other deeper historical layers were also revealed and some are still not processed in arenas of land reform, elite psychology and colonial prejudices. These internal contradictions are also seen in the fact that often the seeds of African nationalism were sown in European capitols and in European languages. However the liberated minds of the new and successive generations of African intellectuals were not oppressed by European places and languages, it was the political economy of colonialism and the marginalization of post-colonial neo-colonialism that are the problems that need to be cured.

IV. The Post-Colonial Period

In the relatively recent colonial past and at present, one should not be surprised that the scars and handicaps of colonialism are still fresh and a wounded infrastructure and mentality are not fully scoured away, nor is the inherited political economy of a global market structure that is not under African control. Africa is still suffering deeply from these illnesses and from distortion and neglect in health, service, transport and communication and low levels of literacy, along with high levels of child labor and child soldiering for bloody diamonds. Africa is developing with a hand tied behind and feet still hobbled. The transition is painful in other respects. As the Arabic saying puts it 'the accusatorial finger of blame has three pointing back at the owner'. Colonialism can be blamed for a lot, but Africans can only blame themselves if they allow this burden to be passed on to the next generation. Endemic corruption, the lack of adequate conflict resolution mechanisms and Pan-African peace forces, and mediators, and the incomplete of deferred post-conflict processes of truth and reconciliation steadily became more of the responsibility of Africans and there are Africans who should be judged for their own crimes against fellow Africans. The faster there is progress in these areas, the faster there will be development and progress.

When progress is slow in this area, the more the colonial legacy will be self-fulfilling, problematic, and prophetic.

Now with colonial armies and governors gone from the scene the possibility of development and democracy is at hand and national sovereignty is restored and the subordinated “tribal” people are reconfigured and regrouped as multi-ethnic federal and decentralized nations with democratic futures and resources in their own hands. ‘Core and Periphery’ relations are an internal problem *IN* Africa when local urban elites suck out the wealth of neglected rural areas. In this context it is more likely that international ‘Core and Periphery’ relations and marginalization rooted outside of Africa can be perpetuated onto the destabilized continent. Failed and collapsing states are a serious problem for domestic and national stability and security but also for regional and global security.

But there are other problems too that block the path leading to the highway of democracy and development. The models of military rule and oversight that clearly truncate the growth of democracy are increasingly rare. Happily more and more soldiers are returning to their barracks now that the self-proclaimed mythology of their “stabilizing influence” has been blown away with the dry winds of the *Harmattan*. It is sad too that the wealth of Africa is partially consumed on wasteful military spending in a land so starved for economic resources to meet pressing human needs. There are parallel concerns about wasteful petroleum energy polices and consumption and the very ‘curse’ of oil in a land so endowed with water, solar and green power. This is especially sad when considering the greenhouse effects of global warming and the corrosive history of oil for supposed equitable development.

There are also one-party or hegemonic parties that are repressing democratic opposition and human rights that stifle human creativity and send African citizens into refugee camps, regional dispersal, and to a global *diaspora* of desperation in unworthy ships. This is a true shame. Truth and Reconciliation about such abuses are needed to unleash dynamic African energies in the arts, culture, medicine, sciences, law, education, and engineering not have its trained experts languish in African prison cells.

Multi-party democracies are increasingly found on the continent from Senegal to Tanzania, from Cape Verde to Ghana and South Africa. The test of ruling parties being voted out of office without tanks surrounding the presidential palace is found more commonly but there is certainly room for improvement and institutionalized patterns of transparent voting in successive election are needed.

In short there is an urgent need to broaden the democratic spirit and practice in Africa. This is not just an attractive “add-on” but a fundamental necessity to have any hope to achieve at least seven critical objectives;

1. Having transparency and accountability in the equitable distribution of natural

wealth.

2. Curbing ethnic or religious strife with democratic models of conflict resolution using referenda and elections.

3. Strengthening women's and human rights to mobilize all human resources for development.

4. Monitoring and blocking abuse of African youth, especially in child soldiering, labor and prostitution

5. Advancing health and educational issues especially on HIV/AIDS, and parasitic and nutritional disorders.

6. Addressing the issues of the brain drain, IDPs, labor dislocation and diasporic problems.

7. Using the African diaspora populations for technology and wealth transfer back to the continent.

V. The Case of Sudan **WITHOUT** Democracy

I have spent almost four decades in professional study of the Sudan, with long periods of residence there and frequent visits. I am profoundly troubled to find that when the golden anniversary of the independence of Sudan from British rule was celebrated earlier this year, but in these fifty years there were only 11 years of dynamic multi-party democracy while there were 39 years of military governments that bogged the nation down in futile and endless wars leading to prodigious waste of human and natural resources that could easily have been used to develop the nation but were ground up in military consumption. Yes, Sudanese democracy was not very stable and yes, there are serious limitations with the Arab-Muslim vs. African identity debate and yes, there is marginalization of the south and other peripheral regions. But a bad democracy was way better than a good war and the longer periods of military rule brought great failures in loss of life, loss of national unity and political repression with its consequent brain drain. Simple staying in power cannot be the best measure of a policy of national unity. Truly the lack of democracy has perpetually been at the core of the North-South struggle, in the strife in the eastern Sudan and is also central to the marginalization of the human and political catastrophe in Darfur. With no functioning democratic institutions the preferred and desperate means of addressing grievances has been by force and violence on all sides with regional and national ruin as the result. The Sudan and Darfur have become the icons of a pariah nation and human destruction. Sudan has been unable to construct a viable unitary nation after a half a century and this is due, in part, to severe limits on political imagination where debate and vote, and the free exchange of ideas are abridged. Socialism, Capitalism, Islamism, and Militarism have all been tried but the lack of democracy in these experiments has

led to very unequal and destabilizing development. The twinkling light, however imperfect and stumbling that it may be, is the Comprehensive Peace Accord or the Navaisha Agreement of January 2005. Yes, it may not be so comprehensive and the peace is tentative, but this resulted from talking with one another rather than shooting. If the CPA is implemented in this land of "Too Many Agreements Dishonored" in 2011 a referendum is slated to peacefully and democratically determine the next relations between these two regions. With this all in place, and with the millions of already lost lives it would be tragic indeed to turn back to war that has little to show for the millions of dollars consumed in wasteful destruction. It appears that this is the last chance. Democracy, Development and Mutual respect or Divorce.

The Sudan is also leaping forward in oil discovery and production. The present and future oil revenues are destined to be huge but are also very complicated with the oil largely in the south and the pipeline heading to the north. With democracy there is some hope that the inherent problems might be resolved and the national unity of Sudan preserved with equitable wealth distribution. But with military "solutions" the result is equally clear in massive national and regional destabilization. We don't need to guess what might happen. One reason that the CPA has its problems is that other groups such as the National Democratic Alliance were not included, not to mention the exclusion of the still extant traditional parties of the north and the slow transformation of the SPLA into a genuine political party with which all southerners might not agree. Inclusion and representation must be part of the democratic foundation. Similarly the Darfur Peace agreement in 2006 offered some hope, but the exclusion of other conflicting parties and Khartoum-backed militias has led to a grave impasse that might portend a new outbreak of bloodshed and mayhem. There is a path to development and peace through democracy, but only a path toward greater destruction with out it. Furthermore this will serve to destabilize the nine other neighbors of Sudan, not to mention that Sudan itself could proceed on the road to a failed state with such amazing promise in its people and resources and one can already see at various points in its long and rich history. The stakes are very high indeed. Perhaps we can discuss these points more fully later.

And the Case of Cape Verde **WITH** Democracy

To conclude on a higher note, let me also add that when I traveled with the guerillas fighting against Portuguese colonialism in Guinea-Bissau as an embedded journalist in the 1970's I saw the power of mass mobilization. Even with the murder of Amilcar Cabral at the historical finish line the war of national liberation was won! When those remaining leaders became the ruling single party of Cape Verde I believed that they still represented the majority. When those leaders agreed to have multiparty

elections and they were peacefully voted out of office I was sad to see my friends leave office but they left power with democracy intact. And when after two terms they could get voted back in office by a razor-thin margin from Cape Verdeans in the diaspora I knew that my hopes for a brighter future in Africa were at hand. Even for this poor island nation, there is development. There is peace, stability and security. Spread the word, Africa is on the move again!

VI. General Conclusions

So, whether in Sudan or across the continent, we can see the terrible price to pay for African states lacking vibrant and meaningful democracy, or in the bright lights in Cape Verde, Tunisia, Ghana, Tanzania, Namibia, and elsewhere where the banner of democracy is inching up the mast, one may observe that without democracy there is:

1. political anxiety and insecurity leading to potentially failed states.
2. a power vacuum that creates fertile ground for polarization and extremist ideas and practices.
3. little accountability, and with few checks and balances there will be corruption.
4. a severe problem of brain drain and refugees from strife or lack of opportunity.
5. marginalization of social groups who are not brought into constructive engagement with development.
6. exclusion of imaginative and fresh perspectives excluded from public debate perceived as a regime threat.
7. only weak or unrepresentative peace accords that risk failure.
8. National capital and human and natural resources that will be lost without full gain to the society.
9. Internationalization of conflict resolution that will erode national sovereignty
10. Unpredictable violent protest arising from frustration in the lack of meaningful democratic forums.
11. a lack of elections and secure, internationally monitored referenda that are recipes for renewed violent conflict.

Even weak and hesitating inclusion is better than rigid exclusion. Clearly broadened democracy is the only path to genuine development and justice. Please add your voices for a much brighter future for Africa and the world.

Thank you so much for your attention and interest.

