



DICTATORSHIPS IN AFRICA

BY VALERY FERIM

The Theoretical Premise of Dictatorship

In political science dictatorship refers to an authoritarian form of government largely dominated by a single individual and unrestrained by law or other checks.¹ In contemporary politics this definition would hardly fit any African country. Many African rulers do maintain some regard for the law in the wake of a growing trend for both national and international politics to submit to judicial proceedings. But this is largely because the international community is weary of periodic botched elections, rebel movements, military

take-overs, popular uprisings, civil strife and failed states. Hence, in place of dictators who are law-makers in their own right, what now exists is the long-serving ruler who invokes constitutional provisions to suit his ends and perpetuate his stay in power. Within the context of this article, this is referred to as a 'dictatorship'.

The elite theory of the state maintains that government by a small ruling group of elites is more desirable as the masses cannot govern themselves. Proponents of this theory argue that there are always two categories



In Africa, the long-serving ruler invokes constitutional provisions to suit his ends and perpetuate his stay in power. Gnassingbé Eyadéma was the president of Togo from 1967 until his death in 2005.

of people in society, the rulers and the ruled. The theory further expounds that the exercise of power is a universal feature of our humanity and that it is not based on consent. Accordingly, power is 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis upon which this probability rests.'² Thus power cannot be based on consent because people have divergent interests in society and 'consent' is the outcome of the exercise of power, regardless of the pretext upon which it is exercised.³

It is in this same vein that shortly after gaining independence most African states resorted to single party systems with highly centralised government bureaucracies. The leaders of new African states were of the opinion that a multiparty system is a waste of resources and it creates disunity as political parties are usually formed along ethnic lines. 'Multi-partyism was thus seen as a vehicle for the politicisation of ethnic and other social cleavages and, as a result, a major obstacle to development in a new society.'⁴ The solution for such leaders was the adoption of a one-party system with a strong leader who can unite people. Such a leader was considered the father of the nation. The African dictator was thus born.

The Vices and Follies of Dictatorships in Africa

The African continent has witnessed a considerable number of long-serving rulers and dictators. Such current leaders include Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea (in power since 1979), Paul Biya of Cameroon (in power since 1982), Yoweri Museveni of Uganda (in power since 1986), and Idriss Déby of Chad (in power since 1990). There have also been former dictators such as Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, who ruled Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC]) from 1965 to 1997; El Hadj Omar Bongo, president of Gabon between 1967 and 2009; Gnassingbé Eyadéma who ruled Togo between 1967 and 2005; Muammar al-Gaddafi who was the ruler of Libya between 1969 and 2011; Hosni Mubarak who was the president of Egypt from 1981 to 2011; and Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo-Brazzaville who was in power from 1979 to 1992 and then from 1997 to present.

Under the leadership of many of these dictators African people have witnessed a number of atrocities. In Zaire, Mobutu's kleptocracy amassed billions of US dollars from the country for his personal use. He bought luxurious apartments in Europe, ruled by decree and endlessly urged Zairians to celebrate his deeds in songs and dances.⁵



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Omar Bongo's rule was characterised by nepotism as his sons and daughters all occupied top positions in government. His embezzlement of Gabon's oil wealth made him one of the richest Africans.⁶ Following his death in 2009 after a 42-year reign, he was replaced by his son, Ali Bongo, as the president of Gabon. Under Paul Biya, Cameroonians continue to witness disregard for key constitutional provisions, arbitrary arrests and detention without trial. To consolidate his grip on power, Biya has continuously relied on the same pool of individuals to staff the civil service. This has led to the proliferation of 'bosses for life'. This gerontocracy has metamorphosed into corruption. In 1999, Transparency International ranked Cameroon as the most corrupt country in the world.⁷

Why Dictatorships Still Prevail

In spite of the suffering dictatorial regimes have inflicted on African countries, there are still a handful of them scattered across the continent. Long-serving leadership has permeated deep into the strata of governance circles.

As youth unemployment is steadily on the rise, the bedrock for violent conflict is being laid as youth idleness has often been exploited by politicians for personal gain. Besides unemployment, poverty and tyrannical rule always drive individuals to willingly respond to calls for any action that challenges the status quo. For instance the Arab Spring⁸ attests to the frustration of the masses over dictatorial rule, bad governance and unfulfilled electoral promises. If any governance lesson can be learnt from the law of diminishing marginal utility it would be that the more the masses are subjected to dictatorial rule, the less satisfaction they derive from it even amongst its most loyal subjects. At saturation point, conflict escalates. The questions then are:

- Why are African countries still tolerant of long-serving dictators?
- Why does it take so long for Africans to reach saturation point where they maintain in unison that enough is enough?



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- Why is it so difficult for some African heads of state to relinquish power?
- Why do they change constitutional provisions to perpetuate their stay in power?
- Why do Africans tolerate constitutions with no limits on presidential terms in office?

These all relate to factors contributing to the perpetuation of long-serving rulers in Africa. In what follows, the underlying causes are explored.

Deification of Leaders in the African Tradition of Respect for Elders

In order to understand why bad governance and long-serving leadership simultaneously flourish across the continent, it is important to examine the perception of leadership by the masses. Africans are complacent with governments for life and the abuse of power largely because of the tendency to revere political leaders. 'The sacred role

as assigned to traditional leaders has been transformed to political leaders.'⁹ Instead of being servants in the spirit of democracy, leaders are lords worshipped by groups of sycophants. They are looked up to by the masses like prophets to transform their lives. Simply being a friend to someone in government is a source of social prestige. The services that politicians are supposed to deliver become favours and favours need to be paid for. Political elites are respected within their societies, honoured during gatherings and are considered bosses for life. While attending a colloquium on the African Renaissance one of the guest presenters, a cabinet minister, walked in with a small delegation some three hours late. The programme coordinator interrupted an ongoing presentation and requested everyone to stand in honour of the minister. Shortly afterwards, the presenter politely chipped in loudly that politicians are notorious for disruptions. In Cameroon, traditional groups organise dances in front of the residence of any individual who has been appointed a cabinet



Protesters pushing for democratic reforms in Morocco marched during a rally in Casablanca. Morocco's 'Arab Spring' protesters mobilised against King Mohammed's monarchic governance laws (June 2011).

minister. This attitude of deifying leaders is the bedrock for tolerance of leadership in whatever form on the continent. This reverence for political leadership has brainwashed the masses into believing that, like religion, leadership cannot and should not be questioned. As a consequence there is the persistence of dictatorships.

Familiarity is Safe

The adage 'better the devil you know than the one you don't' also aptly explains the perpetuation of long-serving leadership on the continent. Guided by the maxim that familiarity is safe, voting patterns in Africa have largely been characterised by a preference for maintaining the status quo rather than changing leadership. Opposition parties are generally motivated by ethnicity and self-interest. They therefore hardly offer any credible alternative to the electorate. This failure of opposition parties to convince the electorate that change should occur has resulted in a proliferation of dominant-party systems in countries like Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and South Africa. Numerous attempts at unifying opposition parties have failed. In Cameroon, for instance, a challenge

to the dominance of the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement faltered due to selfishness and greed. In 2004, a coalition of opposition parties collapsed following disagreements over the choice of a candidate.

The African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa, the Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) in Botswana and the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) in Zimbabwe have all been the ruling parties in their respective countries since independence in 1994, 1966 and 1980 respectively. Being liberation parties, they still appeal to citizens in spite of their failures. The ANC for instance still thrives amidst countless service delivery protests and corruption amongst the rank and file of government officials. Under the leadership of the ZANU-PF, Zimbabwe underwent one of the greatest economic slumps, coupled with inflation and a brain drain that the continent has ever witnessed.¹⁰ In spite of extensive mineral wealth from the diamond industry, the ruling Botswana Democratic Party (BDP) in Botswana has largely failed to ameliorate the condition of the poor. Most citizens in these countries are convinced that the liberation party is their baby and in spite of its flaws, 'a baby cannot be thrown away with the bathwater'. It is



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within this mentality of obstinately clinging onto liberation parties coupled with the absence of a credible opposition that long-serving rulers thrive in Africa.

Rule by Force and Intimidation

The use of force has been a traditional tool employed by corrupt African dictatorships to intimidate opposition, silence dissenters and perpetuate their stay in office. It falls into line with the Italian philosopher, Niccolò Machiavelli's doctrine that 'fear is maintained by a dread of punishment that never fails.'¹¹ In order to consolidate power, President Biya of Cameroon has been on a witch-hunt to eliminate all those who threaten his grip on power. The country's former prime minister and other top ranking government officials, who were considered potential successors to the president, have been jailed on corruption charges.

Protests erupted in Swaziland in 2011 over a 39 year ban on political parties and economic collapse amidst King Mswati's lavish lifestyle. Further calls for democratisation in Africa's last absolute monarchy were met by vicious crackdowns by the Swazi police. In Zimbabwe, the Zanu-PF regime has utilised repressive policies such as the notorious insult laws and the public order and security act. These policies give excessive powers to the police to curtail freedom of assembly, stifle civil society and neutralise opposition to the regime. In Equatorial Guinea Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo has developed a personality cult. He has been declared the country's god who 'can decide to kill without anyone calling him to account and without going to hell.'¹² Such absolute powers wielded by African dictators provide the carrot and the stick necessary to reward supporters and neutralise dissenters. Tyrannical

powers and the ruthless use of force have been the backbone in the consolidation of power by African dictators.

Fear of Persecution After the Term of Office

The prosecution of individuals for corruption and crimes against humanity by judicial bodies such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) and other special courts is taking a toll on former dictators. The East Timorese Nobel Prize laureate José Ramos-Horta aptly maintains that, 'in this day and age you cannot kill hundreds of people, destroy a whole country and then just get fired'.¹³ There is a desire by victims and criminal tribunals for perpetrators to be brought to justice in their life-time. Gone are the days where justice was compromised for the sake of peace. The former president of Liberia, Charles Taylor, was extradited from Nigeria and indicted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. He was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in April 2012 and was sentenced to 50 years in jail. The former vice president of the DRC, Jean-Pierre Bemba, was indicted in 2008 by the ICC for war crimes and crimes against humanity. In June 2012, the former Egyptian strongman Hosni Mubarak was sentenced to life imprisonment by an Egyptian court following allegations of corruption and the abuse of power for the premeditated murder of peaceful protestors during the revolution. African dictators are aware of the possibility that as long as they are in power, they are immune from or can manoeuvre around prosecution. The ICC issued a warrant of arrest for Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir in 2009. In addition to the arrest warrant being condemned by the African Union and the Arab League, the president has avoided arrest largely because he is a sitting head of state with diplomatic privileges and immunities.

It is within this emerging track record of prosecuting African leaders for crimes committed while in office that the continent has witnessed long-serving leaders and governments for life. In order to consolidate power while in office, African dictators commit numerous atrocities including the embezzlement of government funds, electoral fraud, extrajudicial killings and crimes against humanity. As there is no longer such a thing as a peaceful retirement, one of the surest ways of evading being haunted by the wrath of retribution is to remain in power until one's death. This is because most African constitutions grant their leaders immunity from prosecution for acts committed

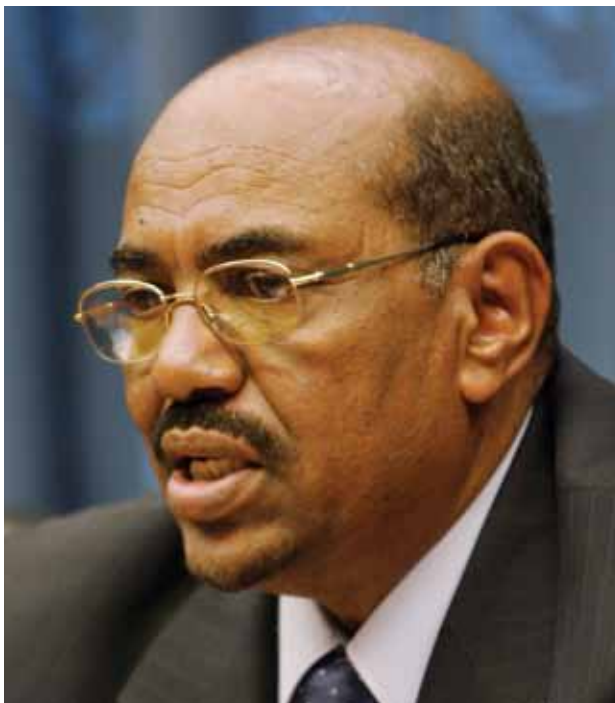
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Charles Taylor, the former president of Liberia, was indicted by the Special Court for Sierra Leone. He was found guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity in April 2012, and sentenced to 50 years in jail.

while in office. However, such immunity can only be guaranteed if the leader stays in power. This accounts for the gerontocracy in African leadership with leaders such as Robert Mugabe (88 years), Paul Biya (79 years) and Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo (70 years). Former presidents like Omar Bongo (president of Gabon for 42 years), Gnassingbé Eyadéma (president of Togo for 38 years), and Muammar al-Gaddafi (president of Libya for 42 years) were all removed from political power only by their deaths. The ages of these Africans sharply contrasts with leaders in developed countries such as Barack Obama of the United States (51 years), David Cameron of the United Kingdom (45 years), François Hollande of France (58 years), Angela Merkel of Germany (58 years), Julia Gillard of Australia (51 years) and Vladimir Putin of Russia (59 years). The reluctance of African leaders to relinquish power probably explains the high rates of unemployment among the youth in most African countries. Gerontocracy in African leadership correlates with the significant challenges experienced in Africa, including corruption, embezzlement, nepotism, unemployment and poverty.



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The Way Forward

If African countries are to overcome this combination of dictatorship, long-serving leaders and gerontocracy, the following recommendations need to be considered.

- There is a need for a radical change of the mind-set which venerates individuals simply because they occupy leadership positions. Respect has to be earned through service, devotion and faithfulness to the masses. It is high time African people hold their leaders accountable for their present actions and do not merely continue to endorse their candidatures in nostalgia for the glories of the past.
- African people and parliaments alike need to institute and strictly adhere to presidential term limits. Constant changes in political leadership should be a regular practice such that bad leadership can easily be replaced at the end of a presidential term while good leaders will set the yardstick against which future leaders will be judged.
- The international community should maintain a hard stance on undemocratic leaders. It should continue to send a strong message that any human rights violations will be dealt with according to international human rights instruments, the responsibility to protect and humanitarian intervention. This will go a long way towards dissuading would-be dictators and pressurise current dictators to democratise their political systems.

As Africans, we should bear in mind that it is our complacency with mediocrity and the tolerance of corrupt leadership and dictatorial regimes that account for the socio-economic and political challenges that the continent is facing. As our destiny lies in our hands, it is high time each and every one of us makes the decision to take a stand against dictatorships in Africa. 🗣️

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Endnotes

- 1 Leach, Robert (2008) *The Politics Companion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 123.
- 2 Weber, Marx (1978) *Economy and Society*. USA: University of California Press, p. 53.
- 3 Dunleavy, Patrick and O'Leary, Brendan (1981) *Theories of the State*. Malaysia: Macmillan Press.
- 4 Decalo, Samuel (1992) The Process, Prospects and Constraints of Democratization. *African Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 362, pp. 7–35.
- 5 Meredith, Martin (2006) *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence*. Great Britain: Free Press, pp. 297–300.
- 6 Yates, Douglas (2006) The Scramble for African Oil. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 13(2), pp. 11–31.
- 7 The Transparency International Corruption Perception Index. Available at: <http://archive.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/previous_cpi/1999>
- 8 This is the term used to describe a wave of popular uprisings that began in 2010 against dictatorships predominantly in parts of North Africa and the Middle East. It led to the collapse of long-serving leaders in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.
- 9 Vakunta, Peter (2006) *The Trouble with Africa*. CODESRIA Bulletin numbers 3 and 4, pp. 32–34.
- 10 Coltart, David (2008) A Decade of Suffering in Zimbabwe: Economic Collapse and Political Repression under Robert Mugabe. *Development Policy Analysis*, No. 5, pp. 1–24.
- 11 Machiavelli, Niccolò (1985), *The Prince*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Translated by Harvey Mansfield.
- 12 BBC News (2003) 'Equatorial Guinea's god'. Available at: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3098007.stm>>
- 13 Cited by Power, J. (2005) 'Dictators Beware!' *International Herald Tribune*. Available at: <<http://www.globalpolicy.org/intljustice/general/2005/0113dictators.htm>>