

african

PERSPECTIVES

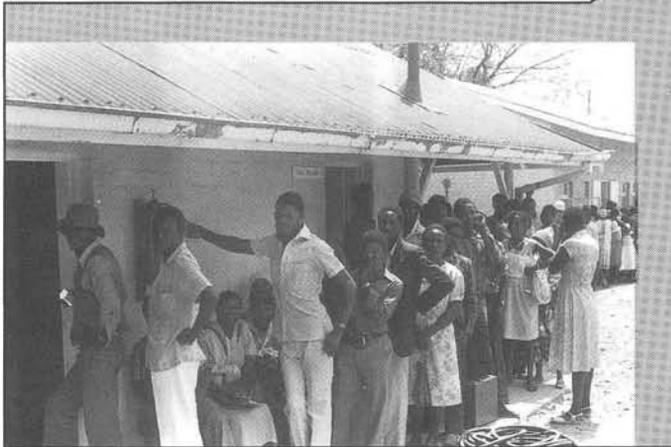
1991

PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

by Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja



Long line at the polling place in Zimbabwe



Credit: Fleshman/Cason

Map 1991 Africa News Service

The Africa Fund (associated with the American Committee on Africa)

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I. Introduction

There is a growing consensus in Africa today that a close relationship exists between the lack of democracy and the deepening crisis of underdevelopment. This point was underlined in the proceedings of the International Conference on Popular Participation in Recovery and Development in Africa, held in Arusha, Tanzania, in February 1990.

What follows focuses on the popular struggles for democracy in the continent today, their significance in the new world order of the post-Cold War era, what has been achieved so far, and the prospects for the future.

II. The Wind of Change from the East

Over 30 years ago, a British prime minister (Harold Macmillan) saw a "wind of change" blowing over the African continent, and advised white settlers to adapt to new realities. Today, a similar wind is blowing in Africa for what our people see as their "second independence," or freedom from the authoritarian rule of African leaders, who have failed to meet the people's expectations of independence. Instead of a better life materially and more freedom, there is increasing misery and repression, while the new rulers have amassed enough wealth to join the ranks of the rich and super-rich of the world.

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This new wind of freedom is said to blow from the east, i.e., from Eastern Europe. Is there any substance to this claim? What impact, if any, did changes in Eastern Europe have on the struggle for democracy in Africa? It must be said that the people of Africa did not have to wait for the breakdown of the Stalinist system in order to fight for genuine freedom and democracy. Examples of popular struggles for democracy before the upheaval in the east include the "second independence movement" in Congo-Kinshasa (Zaire), similar uprisings in Chad and Uganda, social movements in the Horn of Africa and elsewhere, and more recently the events of October 1988 in Algiers. However, if the democracy movement in postcolonial Africa did exist prior to changes in Eastern Europe, these developments gave it a new impetus.

The radical changes in Eastern Europe had an important demonstration effect all over Africa: in the north (Algeria), in the west (Benin, Cape Verde, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Togo), in the center (Congo, Gabon, Zaire), in the east (Kenya), and the south (Zambia). If the monopoly of the Party could crumble so rapidly in countries of Eastern Europe, where the security apparatus had immense resources of repression, it was inevitable that the fragile states of postcolonial Africa could give in to the least serious challenges to their authority once the external protection provided by the Cold War was lost.

For some African heads of state, the fall of a close ally in the person of Nicolae Ceaucescu was very traumatic. This was particularly true for Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko, who received a written message from his own foreign service employees that he is likely to meet the same fate as his Romanian friend if he continues to resist the people's call for democracy. The Zairian dictator seems to have taken this warning seriously.

But what is the real impact of the changes in Eastern Europe on the democratization process in Africa? In the first place, the single party model is finally and totally discredited.

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ed. The model has failed to live up to its claims as the guarantor of national unity against tribalism and the engine of accelerated economic development. In reality, the single party revealed itself more and more as a simple tool of repression. Based on the Stalinist model, which by the way has no foundation in classical Marxist theory, the African one-party system has become an anachronism. In the second place, the Western neocolonial powers can no longer justify their support for this system, even if reactionaries and racists within the Establishment continue to hold the view that Africans are not ready for democracy.

III. Universality of principles, specificity of institutions

Democracy is not an exclusive property of the West. Democratic norms and principles are universal. The institutions through which they are realized may vary in time and

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space (i.e., through historical epochs and from country to country). The noted British historian C. Northcote Parkinson (author of Parkinson's Law) states about the universality of democracy:

In commenting upon the course of history, St. Augustine is shrewd enough to suggest (as did Sallust before him) that the Athenians exceeded other people more in their publicity than in their deeds. Most subsequent scholars have been more credulous, one result being a surprisingly widespread belief that the Athenians were the inventors of democracy. That they were nothing of the kind is tolerably clear. What we owe to the Athenians is not the thing itself or even its name but the earliest detailed account of how a democracy came into being, flourished and collapsed. Of the Indian democracies, which were probably older, we have all too little precise information. There is, however, a sense in which many people have had a measure of democracy in their village life. (*The Evolution of Political Thought*, Houghton-Mifflin Co., Boston 1958, p.7)

That many of the peoples of precolonial Africa experienced a measure of democracy at the village level and, indeed, beyond the village in larger political communities has been well established. There, as elsewhere, there was democracy, in addition to tyranny and other forms of rule. Democracy as "a government of the people, by the people, and for the people," to use Abraham Lincoln's definition, does imply a number of norms or principles that were found in those societies:

- (a) the idea that authority emanates from the people and that its exercise must be circumscribed by a set of rules with respect to its limits and mode of operation, and not arbitrary;
- (b) the principle of accountability, that rulers are accountable to the people for their acts;
- (c) the right of citizens to participate in the management of public affairs;
- (d) the right of people to change the government, including the right to revolution, a right that Lincoln defended

eloquently in a Congressional speech on January 12, 1848 against the U.S. invasion of Mexico:

Any people anywhere, being inclined and having the power, have the right to rise up, and shake off the existing government and form a new one that suits them better. This is a most valuable — a most sacred right — a right, which we hope and believe, is to liberate the world. (*The New York Times*, October 31, 1990)

This is a right that the people of Africa rose to exercise against colonial rule, which was based on economic exploitation, political repression, and cultural oppression. But decolonization was a partial revolution. For though it was characterized by a rupture in state power or in political leadership, it was marked by a continuity in the functions of the state, namely, resource extraction and social control. Contrary to the countries of advanced capitalism, where the private sector is the primary arena of accumulation, the state

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in Africa is at once the major source of wealth and the means of preserving it. Hence the obsession with indefinite tenure of office. The result is the privatization of the state itself, the expansion of the state sector, and the diminution of its administrative capabilities. Servant of the minority in power, the state thus privatized is no longer capable of serving the majority of the population in an adequate manner. Hence its authoritarian and anti-democratic character. To resolve the current economic crisis and realize their deepest aspirations, the people are determined to bring about a "second independence" through a radical transformation of the neo-colonial state.

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IV. Prospects for democracy

Democracy will not be handed over on a silver platter. It will come about only through popular struggles. It is, in other words, the result of such struggles, a conquest by freedom-loving people determined to realize their goal of a better life.

It is to be feared, at least in the short term, that current leaders may succeed in replacing the single-party dictatorship with a democratic formalism, or a democracy in form rather than content. I am alluding here to a multipartyism without democracy, as it is already practiced in Egypt, Senegal, Tunisia and elsewhere (the dominance of one party, electoral fraud,

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lack of alternation in rule, etc.). Recent developments in Gabon and Cote d'Ivoire are not reassuring. A lot of hope remains with respect to the Beninois experiment, whose results should be rich in lessons for the rest of the continent — like those of Cape Verde.

We must acknowledge that a lot of progress has already been made during the last two years. For example, we may cite the following developments:

- (a) The widespread commitment to the principle of rule of law, with a judicial system capable of ensuring the impartiality and the protection of basic rights;
- (b) The evolution, slow but steady, of a culture of freedom, with the defense of the right to criticize the government, freedom of expression in general, and freedom of press in particular;
- (c) The commitment to the idea of political and trade union pluralism, together with the independence of mass organizations from the state and political parties, an idea defended in a now famous essay by South African Communist leader Joe Slovo. ("A Long-Banned Voice Enters the Debate", *Africa News*, 2/26/90);
- (d) The commitment to the principle of accountability, with a civil society that is assertive and eager to participate in the management of public affairs through free and fair elections, decentralized governmental structures, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The democratization process in Africa today is irreversible.

The democratization process in Africa today is irreversible. There may be setbacks here and there, resistance by well-entrenched kleptocrats, and Machiavellian manipulation of democratic forces by clever leaders. But two factors seem to promise hope for the future:

- (a) the people can no longer be intimidated by the ruling oligarchies, as they are determined to assert their right to revolution;
- (b) the neocolonial umbrella relied upon by corrupt and discredited regimes to stay in power has collapsed with the end of the Cold War. No longer is loyalty to one super power or the other sufficient foundation for an authoritarian government.

Pressure your government to stop supporting authoritarian and antidemocratic regimes that have plunged our countries into economic and social ruin.

Although change will come about as a result of political dynamics in each country, there is need for principled support for democracy in Africa by all the people of good will around the world. The best support we hope to get from you is to pressure your own government to stop supporting authoritarian and antidemocratic regimes that have plunged our countries into economic and social ruin. The best hope for democracy in Africa and elsewhere in the countries of the South is a U.S. foreign policy based on the principles of fairness, equality, and freedom, and a well informed public capable of influencing such a policy.

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Washington, DC
March 1991

Written in March 1991, published November 1991. Additional copies of this publication are available from The Africa Fund. Price: 30¢ each. Over twenty, 15¢ each. Please add 15% postage. Minimum order \$1.00.

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