Lecture

Diagnosing African politics[*]

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This lecture honouring Harold Wolpe comes at a time when his contribution is more appreciated than ever before. Although his focus was South Africa his provocative contributions surpassed the country. Wolpe was one of the admired conceptualisers of his generation. By inventing a new radicalism he left his mark on South African scholarship, introduced new approaches to the race question, and infuriated enough to be classified by some as a pariah. Academics that are activists always walk a similar path and indulge in their independence of thought.

When I was ten I saw a telephone for the first time. It was in my native Guinea Bissau where innovations of life took time to say hi. My uncle, who lived in the same street as my family, behind the only hotel in town, called the Grande Hotel, although it only had 20 rooms, was a privileged fellow. He worked at the central post office as a senior staff and therefore could easily justify why he was one of the first to have a telephone. At those times a telephone was one of those bulky thermo-plastic types of machines, with a rotary circle to dial. It had the ten digits but in fact only zero worked. It served to call the operator that made the connection manually.

I marvelled that one could talk without seeing and be heard far way without shouting across. In my innocence I could not relate that instrument with anything but pure joy. However, soon after my father was put in jail by the Portuguese Intelligence police, PIDE: because of his links with terrorism as I was told. This was disturbing news. I still remember that telephone was indeed associated with pure joy, because much later it was through it that we were told he was doing fine, but not much more could be said.

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[*] Harold Wolpe Memorial Lecture, Johannesburg, October 9, 2015.

The telephone revolution, in fact the communication revolution, is closely associated with politics. I have in one generation moved from one level and device to another with a speed that does not have an equivalent in all the previous generations. And this revolution is happening in Africa, in comparative terms, faster than any other region in the world.

Discussing voice, identity, expression of will to exercise of power is now completely different from ever before, thanks to the fact that the six billion cell phones are making us one big family. Families have good and bad behaviour, they enshrine the complexity of the human fabric with its contradictions, assumptions and conquests. Families aspire to have harmony, but by no means automatically get it. That is why they manage their behaviour with beliefs, protocols and acquired habits; in one word, they regulate.

It is said that the most sophisticated form of regulation is democracy. Let us assess the African record in this regard. The trend towards democratic politics in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, has become ubiquitous. Democracy, however imperfect it may be, has assumed the game in town, defining the basis of politics and power, and a means of allocating scarce values in political communities. African politics in both its historical and contemporary dimensions, as Naomi Chazan et al (1999: 6) rightly noted, 'constitute the microcosm of political forms and contents, experiences and patterns, trends and prospects'.

In their genealogy, countries' differing experiences and encounters have marked their democratic footprint. Political regimes ranging from multi-party systems to military dictatorships, one-party rule, political monarchies, and sometimes outright political autocracy and tyranny, are familiar to contemporary Africa.

Countries' records have differed in form and content. The configuration of class and social context, coalition building, alignment and re-alignment of political actors, agencies, and political outcomes, contribute to defy any strict characterisation of African politics. Indeed, some argue that in terms of politics, we should talk about 'Africas' and not 'Africa' in a monolithic sense.

There is no doubt that comprehending African politics in its historical and contemporary dimensions has kept African scholars busy. They have created narratives, conceptual and theoretical constructions, deconstructions and reconstructions, polemical and ideological debates, and intellectual projections and advocacy that are vast and sometimes overwhelming. The

range of the discourses include dissecting the colonial encounter and its political economy, post-colonial nation building, state-civil society relations, political transitions, social movements in the political process, gender and politics, parties and other political institutions and, more recently, the interface between democracy and development or markets.

Allow me to capture and analyse some of the paradigms and perspectives articulated in diagnosing African politics.

In diagnosing African politics, perspectives and paradigms have been adopted in different historical contexts. Serious intellectual debates were generated amongst African scholars and between them and the Africanists. Three of these paradigms can be teased out in broad categories. The first is what we refer to as the social identity paradigm, the second is the political economy paradigm, and the third is the social movement paradigm.

The first paradigm has different strands. Perhaps, a good starting point is the *theory of the two publics* articulated by Peter Ekeh (1975), which focuses on how the colonial encounter shaped the nature of politics in Africa, through the bifurcation of individual identities, personalities and public spaces. Colonialism in Ekeh's view was an 'epochal event whose supra-individual consequences have lingered in fundamental ways, long after actual colonization and the colonial situation have ceased to exist. Colonialism is to Africa what the industrial revolution and French revolution were to Europe' (Osaghae 2003:3). As such, 'it is to the colonial experience that any valid conceptualization of the unique nature of African politics must look' (Ekeh 1975:93). According to Ekeh, the problem of corruption, mismanagement, personalisation of power, and political autocracy cannot be understood except through a sociological analysis of how the colonial experience reshaped social values through the kind of structures and institutions created, of which the conditions and realities subsist until the present.

Colonialism created dual public spaces and dual identities, what Ekeh referred to as the civic and the primordial publics. The civic public is an arena of political amoralism, while the primordial public is the space for public morality and decency. Given the brutality and arbitrariness of colonial governance, the civic public space lacks legitimacy and public support; in other words an arena viewed by many with suspicion, antipathy and, possibly, plunder. The primordial space is that of traditional affection – where the people find comfort, acceptance and belonging, hence confers legitimacy and moral values. A bit like a family. As the state remains 'alien',

people's perceptions and attitude towards it, including of those who manage state power, remains one of distrust, poor support and often times, vandalism. The crisis of the state and politics in Africa is therefore located in this dualism of public spaces and political construction of legitimacy.

The ethnic dimension of politics is an important strand of African politics. Prominent scholars including Onigu Otite (1990), Okwudiba Nnoli (1980, 1989, 1998), Eghosa Osaghae (2001), Mahmood Mamdani (1996) and Archie Mafeje (1971, 1991), dwell on this issue extensively. Archie Mafeje (1971, 1991) provides a useful deconstruction of tribalism which, hitherto, was used by western anthropological researchers in their study of Africa, its politics and society.

The pejorative notion of tribalism which is often used in the study of the 'other' or the 'natives' by anthropological Africanists distorts Africa's political and social realities and reinforces stereotypes of inferiority and social backwardness. Tribalism denotes 'self-contained, autonomous communities, practising subsistence economy with no, or limited, external trade' (Mafeje 1971:257). More recently ethnicity and ethnic relations replaced the notion of tribal communities in the discourse. Ethnic groups according to Onigu Otite (1990:17) are categories of people characterised by cultural criteria of symbols including language, value systems and normative behaviour and whose members are anchored in a particular territory. They are neither autarkic groups nor are they excluded from constant interactions and reconfiguration. The thrust of the ethnic interpretations of politics in Africa is that the colonial policy of divide and rule –based on the ethnic principle cemented ethnic identities – deepened inter-ethnic competition and exacerbated ethnic conflicts. Indeed, access to the state and its resources either at the local or national level can be based on ethnic arithmetic, hence the size, social positioning, and political leverage exercised by ethnic groups becoming a driving force of power dynamics in Africa. There is a cesspool of struggles by ethnic identities to capture the state, or at least gain control of its instrumentalities.

Mahmood Mamdani offers a very insightful analysis of social identity politics and the character of the state in his seminal book – *Citizens and Subjects* (1996). With the concept of decentralised despotism, Mamdani sought to deconstruct the structure and mechanics of the colonial state and how it shaped inter-group relations in Africa. Premised on the logic of indirect rule, the colonial state was a bifurcated state, which existed at two levels – the central state and local state. The local state was the domain of

the native authorities and that was where the natives were to be containerised and governed. Ethnic identities and rigidities were the hallmark of the native authority system; every native was defined within the context of a native authority. While civil law governed the central state, customary law was the legal framework for the native authority system. The former was the domain of rights, and racialised; the latter was one of tradition and customs and ethnicised. But custom in this case, as Mamdani (1996:22) noted, was the language of force, masking the uncustomary powers of the native authorities.

The way this reality permeated the independent states is the subject of many research contributions, but no major controversy. Basically it is admitted that at independence, the bifurcated colonial state was de-racialised, but not democratised. Democratisation at independence became synonymous to de-racialisation of civil power, rather than detribalisation of customary power.

Another important body of contributions to diagnose African politics is the mostly Marxian political economy approach. Scholars like Samir Amin (1976, 1978), Walter Rodney (1972), Claude Ake (1981), Bade Onimode (1988), Nzongola-Ntalaja (1987), Peter Anyang' N'yongo (1989), and Dani Nabudere (1978), adopted this approach. For them, the global economic system is the driving force in shaping the context and dynamics of politics in peripheral countries in general, and Africa in particular. Some of these scholars focus on what they term the logic of imperialism, while others put emphasis on internal class formation and its power consequences. Samir Amin, for example, underscores the fact that we need to understand the nature of accumulation on a world scale within the global capitalist system and its inherent contradictions, before we can unravel the nature of politics in a specific country. African countries are not marginalised in terms of integration into the global capitalist system; rather the pattern of their integration, which he calls 'mal-integration', is the prominent issue.

Finally, another group of scholars focused on the issue of social movements, and popular forces, including civil society movements. This approach seeks to understand politics and power from 'below' and the struggles of the people for improved governance. This approach has been used both in understanding the decolonisation process and the recent wave of democratisation that swept the continent in late 1980s and 1990s (on recent democratisation see, for example, Mamdani (ed) 2005, Mamdani et al 1988, Anyang' Nyong'o (ed) 1987).

The above perspectives and paradigms offer alternative analytical lenses,

which are historical, nuanced and rigorous. These approaches are in contradiction to the mainstream perspectives, notably the neo-patrimonial school, which celebrates the pathologies of African politics. It describes African politics as a haven of patron-client relations characterised by corruption, cronyism, *informalisation* of political life and disorderly rules and procedure (see Van de Walle 2007). Indeed, Africa is seen to work through an inverse logic of political disorder and chaos (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Its political elites are believed to be capricious and perverse, inclined towards a 'politics of the belly' (Bayart 1993), a euphemism for lawlessness and corruption. In its very extreme, neo-patrimonial theory creates a parallel between African cultural traits and the decadence of African politics. African culture and traditions are viewed as regressive and permissive of immoral political behaviour or conduct.

As Thandika Mkandawire (2013:5) notes, the neo-patrimonial theory, while describing the styles of the exercise of authority, the mannerisms of certain colourful political leaders, or the social practices associated with some states, and the individuals occupying different positions within them, it fails in analytical content, explanatory capacity or predictive value. It does not advance our knowledge or understanding of the nature of politics, economy and society in Africa.

Analysing African politics is a contested issue. African countries are marked by their diversity. The plurality affects how politics evolve. Ethnic, religious, linguistic, spatial, gender and class dimensions all contribute to a complex picture. For example, the continent has about 2,110 living languages constituting about 30 per cent of the world's total. With forced amalgamation, there was the indiscriminate drawing of political boundaries by the colonial authorities lumping non-identical groups and communities together in the newly created states. Constructing nation-states and promoting cohesive national politics by groups and communities without identical social and political history, cultural affinity or social contiguity has been a major challenge.

Politics have been fractured, disempowering for the majority, non-inclusive and, at times, violent. Civil society organisations, for example, in many instances were ruthlessly suppressed, and dissent regarded as treason.

The trend of politics and political regimes that unfolded on the continent since independence is obviously not monolithic. Some countries kept faith with multi-party democratic politics, although with a mostly dominant one-party-system, while others had it official. After independence many reclined

into a cycle of military coups and political dictatorships.

There were two major global and national currents that influenced the nature of politics in African countries: the cold war and the imperative of nation-building. The politics of the cold war promoted ideological proxies and satellite states, especially in Africa. What mattered in those proxy countries was not so much the internal configuration of power and the desires of the polity but external allegiances. Political accountability and citizens' voices in domestic politics were discounted. The imperative of nation-building, on the other hand, sought expression in the unitary systems of government, as a means of containing and managing diversity. One-party rule leaders were convinced that in order to contain the fissiparous tendencies of Africa's plural societies, political unison in a one-party state will be the magic wand. However, this was never to be.

There was a concentration and centralisation of power around political leaders or oligarchs. In many countries political power was highly centralised and managed, both institutionally and operationally. Ethnic identity was also well entrenched. While civil society continues to grow exponentially, paradoxically, the political space shrank remarkably. The struggle for space that could allow political dissent or identity expression to flourish mostly finds one way of venting: ethnicity.

The changes that took place since the late 1980s, with the eclipse of the cold war, soon gained momentum in Africa. Authoritarian regimes gradually gave way to nascent democratic attempts, shifting the nature of the political debate. Elections, political parties, contestation, rights, institutional checks, and governance accountability are now common currencies in Africa. A rich literature has emerged on the democratisation process in the continent, both from theoretical and empirical dimensions, comparing regional experiences and country case-studies (see, for example, Chole and Ibrahim (eds) 1995, Ake 2000, Lumumba-Kasongo (ed) 2005, Nzongola Ntalaja and Lee (eds) 1997, Boafo-Arthur (ed), Murunga and Nasongo (ed) 2007, Adejumobi (ed) 2010).

Claude Ake (2000:9-11) provided a refreshing theoretical interrogation of the liberal democracy paradigm that dominated the views outside but also in Africa. Ake argued that liberal democracy is markedly different from democracy even though it tends to have affinities with it, with features like consent of the governed, formal political equality, inalienable human rights, accountability of power to the governed and rule of law. However, they are not one and the same. Indeed, liberal democracy is a negation of the whole

concept of democracy. Instead of sovereignty of the people, liberal democracy offers sovereignty of the law (Ake 2000:10).

Adebayo Olukoshi (1998:14) takes a different perspective from Claude Ake and argues that it is possible to see democracy and capitalism as different projects in the history of the modern world without necessarily having any automatic or organic correlation. Persuasively, he contends that 'it is not capitalism that is inherently democratic; the hidden and open, sometimes bitter, struggles against repressive tendencies and instincts have been central to the production of some of the reforms that are today the hallmark of liberal democracy'. In other words, liberal democracy arose not necessarily because but in spite of capitalism, and the possibility of its reproduction in other societies, including African countries with less developed capitalist system, is therefore possible and desirable.

On the interface between democracy and development in Africa, a very robust polemical debate arose in CODESRIA intellectual circles in the 1990s especially between Thandika Mkandawire and Peter Anyang' Nyong'o (for a review of this debate see Adejumobi 2002). The latter argued that democracy is a sine qua non for development. Citing the experiences of Mauritius and Botswana that achieved some relative economic progress under supposed democratic regimes, Anyang' Nyong'o tasks African scholars and policy makers to take liberal democracy very seriously as it constitutes a fundamental basis for promoting development. Contrarily, Mkandawire contends that democracy is a worthwhile social value in itself, which all countries must aspire to given the freedom and opportunities that it confers; it should not be conceptually merged with development. Democracy may or may not produce development, and the experience of the Asian tigers which were essentially authoritarian regimes with unprecedented record of economic transformation indicates that development is possible without a full democracy. While democracy is good in itself, it must link concretely to the lives of the citizenry.

The progress recorded in democratic politics in Africa in recent times is not without its challenges and constraints. Relish and legacy of authoritarian practices loom large in many countries. Executive dominance, though in decline, remains ubiquitous as the use of discretionary power threatens the growth of democratic dispensations. Limited institutional growth and restraint also poses a challenge to political accountability. Parliaments, judiciary, and opposition political parties – three important democratic institutions – remain suborned in many countries, with little capacity, resources and

autonomous space. Institutions of horizontal accountability, like the anti-corruption and human rights bodies, or audit departments, do not have the vitality or the capacity for effective controls. Political impunity is still rampant.

Politics is still perceived as a 'do or die' affair in which politicians and political parties stake virtually everything in the accumulation and retention of power. This makes elections a discounted value in promoting meaningful change in governance. Often the winner-takes-all syndrome prevails. Negotiation of political power is associated with access to public resources. However, the rise and flourishing of civil society portends a good omen for democratic politics in Africa. The possibility of accountability from below is increasing by the day as citizens demand rights and opportunities. Civil society claims and agitations, if consistent and sustained, may begin to reshape not only the character of politics but also the nature and essence of the state.

Often African states are more attentive to the criticism they receive from international media or external public opinion than they do with their own constituents. To understand how African states mediate multiple levels of political obligations to their own national agendas, to their regional/continental obligations and the global community, especially where there are obvious and sometimes not so obvious conflicts of interest, I will delve into the source of international law which defines such obligations.

Transformations in the domains of war, war crimes, human rights, democratic participation, as well as the environment, have substantially shifted the classical regime of sovereignty towards a more eroded interpretation of sovereignty.

Classic regime of sovereignty refers to a state-centric conception of sovereignty where international law is questioned as a law and considers any legal obligations outside the national realm as entirely optional. Tenants of this view contend that most international 'law' that exists today is a compilation of international conventions and treaty agreements mutually convenient to the signatory nations or imposed upon them by more powerful nations (Pfaff 2000). This classical conception of sovereignty apprehends international law as horizontal and voluntary and domestic law as hierarchical and compulsory.

On the other hand, the new mainstreamed views on sovereignty entrench powers and constraints, rights and duties, in international law that – albeit ultimately formulated by states – go beyond the traditional conception of the

proper scope and boundaries of states, and can come into conflict, and sometimes contradiction, with national laws. In this perspective, international law is to be regarded as a law not because of some higher moral code or by sovereign command but because states freely consented to abide by it. In absence of supranational authority, it goes without saying that agreements and norms obtained from consent rather than ultimate authority can be withdrawn should the agreed-upon norm no longer fit the national interest. As a matter of realpolitik the classic perception of sovereignty supersedes the liberal one when strategic interests and national pride are at stake. The extent to which states exercise their sovereignty is contingent to their overall influence at the global scale.

Even in the areas of human rights, where tremendous progress has been made in enforcing the rule of law, the resurgence of the state-centric conception of sovereignty is very present. For instance some African states have been selective in collaborating with the International Criminal Court (ICC) or international bodies on presumed war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing. The African Union has also voiced the protection of the dignity, sovereignty and integrity of the continent when prosecutions pose a real threat to peace and stability.

International environmental treaties, regimes, and organisations have placed in question elements of state sovereignty, but have not yet locked the drive for national self-determination and its related 'reasons of state' into a transparent, effective, and accountable global framework (Held 2003). Here, again, national interest determines the extent to which states ratify and abide to international obligations, as illustrated in the case of climate change or trade negotiations. Commitments from ill-negotiated agreements result, often times, in reversals, especially when explicit sanctions are not defined. In absence of a supranational enforcement mechanism, it goes without saying that agreements and norms obtained from consent, rather than ultimate authority, can be withdrawn or violated. Beyond one country's interests, compliance with international obligations is contingent upon a successful dynamic wherein countries assume both regional and global obligations, while internalising them into domestic law. Such process leads to a reconstruction of national interests and eventually national identities (Koh 1997).

Let me conclude.
On the quality and content of the democratic process in Africa, while

progress is limited and uneven (UNECA 2009, UNECA and UNDP 2013), there is some consensus that the nature of politics is changing in Africa. Citizens' political participation is on the increase, there is better observance of the rule of law, political freedom is widening, conflicts have largely receded, and with increasing political stability and predictable political environment, steady economic growth has been posted. Executive arrogation of power which, hitherto, was a dominant culture of public life, is being redefined as other institutions of democracy like the parliament, the judiciary, media and civil society are gradually checking power excesses. Let us agree that Africa's democracy remains fragile and tenuous and the possibility of many reversals lurks. The Mo Ibrahim Index on African Governance, released on October 5, 2015, says it all: we have progressed until recently but now we are stalling.

Africa remains a continent in transition: a continent in which both domestic and external forces are impacting on the nature of its politics and economy. Diagnosing African politics in its complexity and variety requires therefore social analytical approaches and methodological tools that take cognisance of history, social structure and context, political agency and the institutional framework of political action and policy.

How could I have imagined that a telephone would teach me so much? My latest generation smartphone does not inspire me like the bulky instrument I discovered when I was ten, but it is a giant reminder that politics will never be the same. In Africa, or anywhere else.

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