

Conflicting Stories and Contending Images of Africa

by

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Introduction

On January 30, 2007 the African Union, at the Eighth Ordinary Session of its Assembly in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, adopted the “African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance.” One of the objectives of the Charter is to “Promote the holding of regular free and fair elections to institutionalize legitimate authority of representative government as well as democratic change of government” (chap. 2, art. 2-3). It stipulates in article 25-4 that the “Perpetrators of unconstitutional changes shall not be allowed to participate in elections to restore the democratic order or hold any position of responsibility in political institutions of their State.” And it defines “unconstitutional change of government” that would “draw appropriate sanctions by the Union” as, *inter alia*, “Any refusal by an incumbent government to relinquish power to the winning party or candidate after free, fair and regular elections; or any amendment or revision of the constitution or legal instruments, which is an infringement on the principles of democratic change of government” (art. 23-4 & 5).

Certainly, the Charter is a response to enduring political practices on the African continent and an expression of an ideal to reach rather than a rule by which everyone abides. What is striking is the contrast between the perfection of the text and the

imperfection of practices. By its own definition, the ways elections results were managed (or mismanaged) by Moi Kibaki in Kenya and Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe constitute “unconstitutional change of government” and should have drawn “appropriate sanctions by the Union”. Instead, the African Union encouraged arrangements for national unity governments in those two countries. By this self-defeating attitude, no one would take the Charter seriously and whoever takes it seriously may end up as a loser.

Cases are numerous that represent such practices of “unconstitutional change of government” on the continent. Among them are constitutional changes in Togo in 2005 to allow Faure Gnassingbé to succeed his father, Gnassingbé Eyadéma (after his death), as President of the country in lieu of the speaker of the national assembly, Mr. Fambaré Natchaba. It will be more telling to describe historical instances where principles and practices clash and when vision conflicts with reality of power than using theoretical discourse. A few suffice to demonstrate how stories conflict with public discourse and how Africa produces multiple and contending images. Doing so is a kind of personal catharsis to exorcize my own apprehensions for the future and exercise my judgment in order to balance my attachment to the continent with my detachment from the misuse of its human and natural resources as well as many instances of miss-governance. Examples abound.

Charles Taylor in Liberia: a criminal presidency

It is hard not to mention electoral maneuvers that put Charles Taylor in power and allowed him to exercise a criminal presidency for seven years in Liberia. The Liberian

case calls for analysis because it shows the many contradictions in African politics and a sharp contrast between theory and praxis.

Former President of Nigeria, Olusegun Obasanjo, granted Charles Taylor political asylum. However, late 2003, the Bush Administration put a prize of US \$2 million on Taylor's head, thus embarrassing Obasanjo, a major U.S. ally in West Africa. The Nigerian President, however, saw the situation not merely as a matter of peace and justice but strongly as an issue of personal ethics, that of a military honor. This kind of approach in policy decision-making is not uncommon in a continent where the personality of the leader tends to grow larger the strength of institutions.

In September that same year, President Obasanjo gave a keynote at the University of Notre Dame. He was addressing a conference on "A Call to Solidarity with Africa." At the end of the speech, a student asked him why the former President of Liberia, Charles Taylor, was still in Nigeria. The indictment of the Liberian former dictator by an U.N.-backed court for crimes against humanity committed in Sierra Leone made Taylor's asylum in Nigeria illegal, according to the student. President Obasanjo responded that he gave his word to Taylor and to the whole word and that, as a military man, he intended to keep his word. A casual listener may have heard an exchange between a principled former military and sitting head of state and a quizzical young student. An informed one may have been shocked by the contradiction between the rule of law and the "whim" of a politician. Yet, when it comes to practical matters, morality is a tricky business.

To be sure, there were calls from inside and outside Liberia to bring Taylor to justice. At the same time, many West African leaders saw the international court's indictment as of little help for Liberia. Mr. Chambas, chairman of the ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), even expressed his disappointment stating that there is some unfairness in mounting pressure on Nigeria.

All things considered, it is not that difficult to see the competing rationales of the two positions. On the one hand, given that Taylor's supporters had not disarmed and that the peacekeeping forces had neither peace to keep nor sufficient forces in place yet, handing Taylor over the court might have sent Liberia back into wide-spread violence; for justice to be implemented, a sustainable peace was needed. On the other hand, there were many other dictators in Africa; if Obasanjo failed to keep his word, not only himself but nobody else would be able to peacefully expel a dictator from power the way Obasanjo did.

Similar arguments are being made today, especially by African leaders, about the anticipated indictment of the President of Sudan, Omar Hassan al-Bashir, by the International Criminal Court regarding the ongoing genocide in Darfur. On the one hand, there cannot be peace without justice and, on the other hand, there cannot be justice without peace. Again, by calling on a political body, the U.N Security Council, to intervene and halt the judicial process, the rule of law is hindered and personality seems, again, to loom larger than institutions. State parties to the AU Charter, by abiding by the treaties they signed and ensuring a strict respect for the rule of law in domestic and as well as in international affairs, would greatly improve the image of the African continent.

The Liberian case shows an image of Africa where traditional loyalties and personality of leaders clash with the rule of law, and where values publicly stated conflict with reality.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide: an African odyssey

It goes without saying that the way African leaders conduct their business affects the vision that external powers have of the continent and the ways in which they interact with the leaders of Africa. Haiti is a point in case. Haiti is not in Africa. However, the position of African countries regarding Aristide when he was overthrown is symptomatic of how African leaders tend to react when confronted with “unconstitutional change of government.” The Haitian case also shows how vulnerable African countries are vis-à-vis external pressures.

With a population of around 8 million, Haiti is the most African of Caribbean states. It is also the poorest in the region. Its independence from France was declared on January 1st, 1804 in Gonaives. In 1985, from that symbolic city, protests began and ultimately led to the fall of the dictator Jean-Claude Duvalier (“Baby Doc”) in 1986, under the watchful eyes of U.S. President, Ronald Reagan. The same city was seized by the rebellion that sent President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile on February 29, 2004.

In 200 years of independence (1804-2004), Haiti had known 46 heads of state, all dictators, with 29 of them either assassinated or overthrown. Jean-Bertrand Aristide was the first President democratically elected in Haiti. The Bush Administration, however, had not developed a good working relationship with the former priest. And the Haitian

President irritated the French Administration by requesting the reimbursement of the 150 million gold-francs Haiti had to pay to King Charles X in 1825 as a price for independence won against the armies of Napoleon.

Zo kwé zo (a man is a man)! According to Francis Kpatindé (*Jeune Afrique*, No. 2252), General Francois Bozizé, the Central African strongman (who took power the previous year by coup d'état), greeted Aristide in Bangui with these words in the Sango language to show respect for his guest even though Aristide was no longer in power. It was an irony for a military man who became President by way of coup d'état to honor in this manner another President who just lost power by way of another coup d'état.

There is an abundance of versions to explain the abrupt departure of Jean-Bertrand Aristide from Port-au-Prince on February 29, 2004. For Aristide, it was a “modern” coup d'état by kidnapping. The U.S. Departments of State and of Defense denied that version. According to them, U.S. officials and marines went to the presidential palace around 4:30 am at Aristide's own request and accompanied him to the airport, where a U.S. military Boeing 757 awaited him. There, the President handed his letter of resignation to Luis Moreno, the number-two official at the U.S. embassy to Haiti.

Actually, the State Department began looking for a country of asylum for Aristide on February 28th. Colin Powell, the then U.S. Secretary of State, is said to have contacted South Africa but, with elections scheduled for April 14, 2004, the A.N.C. was reluctant to grant that asylum. Why not Morocco which gave asylum to Zaire's Mobutu Sesse Seko

in 1997? Again, another refusal. France was eager to repair its relationship with the U.S., damaged by disagreements over the war on Iraq. Colin Powell asked the then French Foreign Affairs Minister, Dominique de Villepin, about the possibility of finding a friendly country for Aristide. Contact was made with President Omar Bongo of Gabon. The Bush Administration was blocking an I.M.F. loan to his country. This situation presented a window of opportunity for a better relationship but, according to official statements, with many Haitians living in Libreville, the security of Aristide could not be guaranteed. And, for certain, President Bongo had his own image to worry about.

Finally, not wanting to miss the opportunity to please the U.S., President Bongo contacted the newly established authorities of the Central African Republic. As Kpatindé reported, General Bozizé offered a qualified “yes” and, after internal consultations, accepted to grant temporary asylum to Aristide. In the meantime, Aristide’s plane was in the air. Dominique de Villepin and Francois Bozizé had a phone conversation, followed by another one with Colin Powell. On March 1st, 2004, the U.S. military Boeing 757 landed in Bangui, bringing Aristide and his wife. Central Africa urgently needed money to pay the salaries of its civil servants and expected to be rewarded for its cooperation.

One can only speculate about the reasons great powers focused on Africa to find a new home for Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti, a distant Caribbean country. Is it because of the African origins of Haiti? Is it because African countries have remained so dependent on foreign aid that they are more vulnerable to external pressure? Or is it due to Africa’s

image and the political expression of the French saying, *qui se ressemble s'assemble* (those who are alike go together)? The answer may be all the above.

In any case, it is another image of Africa ready to make concessions out of economic weakness and to accept the role of pawn rather than player in the international arena. By so doing, it allows external powers to use the continent to solve their own problems. For example, bringing stability to Haiti, among other things, would help the U.S. stop a wave of illegal Haitian immigration to the U.S.

Niger River basin: uncommon defense of a common good

The Niger River is the third largest in Africa after the Nile and the Congo. From its source in Guinea to the Niger Delta in Nigeria, it stretches over 4,200 km. Shared by nine riparian states (Bénin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali, Niger and Nigeria,) it services an estimated 110 million people.

“Rivers have a perverse habit of wandering across borders... and nation states have a perverse habit of treating whatever portion of them that flows within their borders as a national resource at their sovereign disposal. How can ‘sovereign’ states, pursuing national self-interest and those policies that seemingly ensure a regime’s survival, cope with the challenge of bi- or multi-national coordination in the use of a common resource?” asked Professor John Waterbury in a 1979 book, *Hydropolitics of the Nile Valley* (Syracuse University Press). Tampering with a common water resource risks becoming a serious point of contention and could ultimately cause an ecology-based

conflict in which everyone is likely to lose. However, the instinct for survival may also lead to cooperation. Such instance can be observed in the Niger River basin.

There are many problems in the Niger River basin. The population is rapidly growing while an estimated one-third of the river volume was lost the past three decades. In Niamey, Niger, for example, the annual average was 30 billion cubic meters in the 1970s and only 20 billion in this period. Climate change caused droughts in the years 1985 and 1990 with part of the river going completely dry, and consequent navigational problems affected local markets. Experts in global climate change predict an even dryer climate in Africa's tropical zones, negatively affecting water supplies.

Pollution is serious with many cities, including Bamako in Mali as well as Niamey, draining untreated waste into the river. Downstream in Burkina Faso, it is unsafe to drink the water, while the deterioration of fish stock has affected local economies and lifestyle. Silt has been out of control and water-borne diseases, particularly bilharziasis and gastritis, compound the threat of HIV/AIDS and related illnesses.

Local traditions call the Niger River "the preferred son of God." As water level recedes, one might feel that "the preferred son of God" is fading away. In 2004, the then French President, Jacques Chirac, organized a meeting in Paris with seven African heads of state on April 26-27 to discuss saving the Niger River and explore solutions for reinforcing the Niger Basin Authority. Focused on technical problems and the extent of the crisis, that gathering on the shore of the Seine River in Europe to discuss the Niger River problems

in Africa only showed the depth of African political and diplomatic weaknesses in addressing regional issues. The opportunity to discuss common problems and collectively finding solutions is, in itself, a good thing. In that regard, the initiative of the French President was timely. Niger, a weak country downstream, has no power to compel riparian states to behave in a desirable way as Egypt does in the Nile Valley with threats and intimidation.

The image of Africa, in this instance, is that of a continent in need of external assistance to address and solve its most pressing domestic and regional problems.

“Battling Siki”: a boxing world champion

In the July 2008 issue of the French monthly newspaper, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Jean-Christophe Servant tells the story of an African boxer in an article, “Boxes d’Afrique: K.-O. mais debout” (p. 26). It is about the Senegalese boxer, Mbarrick Fall, alias “Battling Siki”. On September 24, 1922, he defeated the French Georges Carpentier. Thus, he became the first African boxing world champion. The World War I veteran was then living in France. Following the victory of the “singular Senegalese,” a young Asian observer wrote an enthusiastic article about this extraordinary event. He said, to quote Jean-Christophe Servant, “Since the start of the colonial process, White people have been paid to beat up Black people. For the first time, a Black person has been paid to do the same to a White” (translation is mine). The name of this obscure writer was Nguyen Ai Quoc. He became better known, later, as the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh.

However, Ho Chi Minh was too enthusiastic to include in his 1922 vision the areas and eras where Blacks are paid by Whites to beat up other Blacks. The Cold War era, with its proxy wars, was a telling example while the “peaceful coexistence” policy between the two main Cold War warriors, the U.S. and the former Soviet Union, was strictly observed. History might repeat itself in the event of increased competition for African strategic raw materials between the U.S. and China while the policy of “constructive engagement” between the two global powers, the old one (U.S.) and new one (China), begun in 1972 with the visit of Richard Nixon to Beijing, continues to hold sway.

To move from pawns to players in international affairs, it is important that leaders of the continent protect and promote the interests of their countries and the well-being of their people.

That is the image of Africans fighting among themselves for causes foreign to the continent. However, in the case of the new mining policy in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), there is reason to believe that African states can also be determined to exercise their sovereign power

The question of re-colonization of Africa: the case of the DRC

It is an aphorism to say that African people have remained poor amidst enormous natural resources. The continent produces 57 percent of cobalt in the world, supplies 46 percent of diamonds, extracts 39 percent of manganese, provides 31 percent of phosphates, exports 21 percent of gold, and is the source of 9 percent of bauxite, not to mention the

current strategic interest in its oil. Despite these riches, the people remain poor, and their countries unstable. For example, in the U.N. human development ranking, two African oil producing countries occupy the near bottom places: Algeria, 104th and Nigeria, 158th over 177 countries (Raf Custer, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, July 2008, p. 12).

Regarding the DRC, the country holds the second largest reserve of copper in the world, after Chili. Its reserves are estimated at 70 million tons for copper, 6 million tons for zinc and 5 million tons for cobalt. According to public officials, more than a third of the territory, 33.8 percent, is conceded to mining companies. In 2002, after two devastating wars (1996-1997 and 1998-2002), when the economic growth was negative, the mining sector contributed up to 30.33 percent of the GDP. In 2007, a year after democratic elections, it fell to 6 percent due to a combination of factors, including fiscal exemptions for corporations, unfair agreements between state and private sector in favor of the latter, and corruption. The mining sector contributed \$27 million to the budget while, according to the World Bank, it made around \$200 million.

Meanwhile, only 28 percent of the money pledged for the reconstruction of DRC has been disbursed. However, interest payments on the \$12 billion debt contracted during Mobutu's dictatorship amounted to \$800 million annually, one third of the budget. International Monetary Funds' conditionalities handicapped renegotiation of the debt. As a result, without adequate financial resources, the government's ability to govern was challenged; there was infrastructure to build, a public health system to establish, an educational system to restore, and jobs to provide in order to stabilize the post-war DRC.

The government of DRC's Prime Minister, Antoine Gizenga, undertook to re-examine mining accords of the transition period (2003-2006). Of the 61 contracts analyzed by an intergovernmental commission, with assistance from experts of the Carter Center, none satisfied criteria for category A (satisfactory and beneficial for all parties); 39 were classified B (need to be seriously renegotiated); and 22 were found in the C category (should be simply cancelled). All these contracts were signed thanks to a very liberal mining code, following the policies of the World Bank.

Then, in September 2007, after two months of negotiations, the People's Republic of China and the Democratic Republic of the Congo signed the "the contract of the century:" a barter system to exchange raw materials against construction of infrastructure. DRC would supply China with 10 million tons of copper and 200,000 tons of cobalt. China, in turn, would build for DRC 3,500 km of roads and a similar amount of railroad, 31 hospitals of 150 beds, 145 health centers, universities, schools and other institutions. China would invest \$9 billion (it might reach up to \$14 billion): \$6 billion in infrastructure and \$3 billion in the mining sector. The China Railway Engineering Company (CREC) promised to train 1,500 local workers (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, Juillet 2008).

The government of Joseph Kabila is determined to go ahead with the implementation of the contract, amidst a mixture of hope of the population, anger of mining companies, and critiques alluding to re-colonization by China. As mentioned by Colette Braeckman in

her article, “Manoeuvres spéculatives dans un Katanga en reconstruction” (*Le Monde Diplomatique*, Juillet 2008, pp. 12-13), there is also fear of destabilization because the West is not pleased, particularly the Belgians, by the signing of this contract. It should be noted that the fear of instability is not based on a lack of good governance and/or the challenges presented by post-conflict public management.

Who is re-colonizing Africa? The Chinese? They didn’t come with guns as in the past colonial experience. However, their “no-strings attached” policy is certainly causing dysfunction in some sectors of African economy and in efforts to reform political systems. Private companies with “strings attached” policies, with the backing of their home countries and the support of international financial institutions, are certainly doing the same.

As Ignacio Ramonet wrote in his book, *Guerres du XXI^e siècle* (p. 106), “One is thus observing an unusual spectacle: the rise of the power of global firms against which traditional powers (states, parties, unions) seem powerless. The principal phenomenon of our era, the liberal globalization, is not driven by states. Facing giant firms, states are increasingly losing their prerogatives. Citizens witness, impotent, a kind of *planetary coup d’état* of a different kind” (translation and emphasis are mine). In a nutshell, those who are --or are trying to-- re-colonize Africa are those who possess the power and have the will to limit the sovereignty of African states, and to decide -if not impose- what they believe is best for the people of the continent.

The case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo represents, thus, another image of Africa: that of a continent that is *struggling* to assert its independence, define its interests and take its destiny in its own hands.

Africa has many faces. Which one best represents the continent? Globalization tends to be synonymous to westernization. And the West has promoted its concept of democracy, freedom and human rights as global values. History has proven that there is no linear causality between democracy, freedom and human rights. Ancient Greeks who gave us democracy did not transmit it with the concepts of freedom and human rights. Their system accommodated slavery. Athenian leaders, however, when taking office, used to take an oath that they would leave the city better than when they found it.

In modern history, the West implemented a system of slavery, engaged in colonial enterprise, and exploited its own workers, while experiencing industrial revolution and building democracy at home. However, one can find freedom and human rights in statecraft as early as 539 BC when the Persian King Cyrus the Great freed Jews in Babylon and sent them back to Jerusalem, providing them with money to rebuild their temple.

Conclusion

Democracy, freedom and human rights are collective, universal endeavors and, therefore should be hailed as such. Africa has done its part and should continue to play its role in the preservation and implementation of those values. The role of Africa's modern states

as organizing principles in this endeavor should not be neglected nor minimized. There resides the challenge posed by the “African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance”.

In meeting that challenge, however, one should keep in mind the warning of Paul Watzlawick: “...the belief that one’s own view of reality is the only reality is the most dangerous of all delusions. It becomes still more dangerous if it is coupled with a missionary zeal to enlighten the rest of the world, whether the rest of the world wishes to be enlightened or not. To refuse to embrace wholeheartedly a particular definition of reality (i.e., ideology), to dare to see the world differently, can become a ‘think crime’ in a truly Orwellian sense...” (*How Real Is Real? Confusion, Disinformation, Communication*, 1976).