

Makers of Nations, Three Wise Men, and a Star from the East

Introduction – Inheriting a “State”

Professor Nic Cheeseman recounts joyfully peoples’ responses the first time he said that he was going to write a book on democracy in Africa. “That will be one of the world’s shortest books,” they said, “up there with the compendium of great English cooking.”¹ It seems even more inconceivable that Africa can contribute to the discussion on democracy and the economy. But it can. It has had this conversation innumerable times in history and might offer the most elucidative view yet.

Today, with decreased economic growth among nations, the rise in inequality among citizens, and the growth of populism and autocracy, the world contemplates whether democracy could be slowing down the economy. Indeed, evidence abounds of autocratic states with improving economic prospects.² The argument that democracy is vital to economic development is no longer indubitable. This essay, however, tracing the African conversation in history, lends a voice to the pursuit of democracy as an end in itself.

Seek ye first the Political Kingdom and all shall be added to you...

This tale begins at the start of what Professor Issa Shivji calls “Africa’s age of developmentalism” which ran from the 1960s to the 1970s.³ It was then that most African states were gaining their independence. However, these newly formed states were peculiar in every regard. First, the state in Africa –including its territory and population – preceded the nation, rather than the other way around. As a result, and second, this meant that the nation itself was an abstraction.⁴

Seeing that African states began sovereign life critically deficient of legitimacy, Shivji explains that the independent state had therefore, a double function. The first was to build the nation while the second was to develop the economy. There was no existing social class that could effectively bear the weight of national development, leaving the state as the only agency of change.⁵

The squalor and despondency in which the Continent existed lent credence to the argument the independence (nationalist) leaders made that the real goal of independence was material. In fact, development assumed the character of a national emergency.⁶ The first President of Tanzania, Mwalimu Nyerere articulated his first objective this way: “Development must be considered first. Our question, with regard to any matter, even the issue of fundamental freedom, must be ‘how does this affect the progress of the Development Plan?’”⁷

¹ See Nic Cheeseman, *Democracy in Africa: Successes, Failures and the Struggle for Political Reform*, Cambridge University Press, 2015

² See David Epstein and Peter Rosendorff, ‘When are Autocracies Economically Efficient?’ accessed at <http://www.columbia.edu/~so33/WorkingPapers/Autocracies.pdf>

³ Issa Shivji is a Tanzanian distinguished professor in constitutional law, author, academic, and one of Africa’s leading experts on law and development issues. See Issa G Shivji, “The influence of ideas and the power relationships that lead to those Ideas on development in Africa”, <https://www.worldhunger.org/articles/05/africa/shivji.htm>, accessed 20th June 2020.

⁴ See Issa Shivji, “The Struggle for Democracy,” <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/shivji/struggle-democracy.htm>, accessed 20th June 2020.

⁵ Issa Shivji, “The Struggle for Democracy”.

⁶ Kwasi Prempeh, ‘Presidential Power in Comparative Perspective: The Puzzling Persistence of Imperial Presidency in Post-Authoritarian Africa’, [2008] *Hastings Const. L.Q.* 800.

⁷ Kwasi Prempeh, ‘Presidential Power in Comparative Perspective,’ quoting statement by President Nyerere.

For this reason, the demands on the state to develop and cultivate national integration were viewed in direct opposition to “western imposed ideals” such as democracy, which was seen to apply brakes to economic development and social change, and hamper national integration by entrenching tribal politics.⁸

“*Seek ye first the political kingdom, and all else shall be added unto you,*” summed up the nature of the social contract underwriting African states according to President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. Nationalist leaders argued that with independence would come substantial social and material improvement for all. To achieve this, they captured the ruling political parties; diminished parliamentary autonomy; institutionalised the imperial presidency; and weakened other liberal democratic systems.⁹

*Huntington’s case against democracy*¹⁰

Nationalist leaders found ideological support in the work of none other than Samuel Huntington, who made a case for delayed democratisation in developing states. He found that democracy, requiring participation and accountability on the part of the governed, could in developing societies where political systems operate in very fragile environments, prove detrimental. This is because the legitimacy of these governments’ decisions and non-decisions was seen in zero-sum ways; meaning that where the government was incapable of meeting a certain demand, the reasons it gave could never be satisfactory to the governed.

Furthermore, since major development goals required substantial input of scarce resources, governments had to find ways to limit the kinds of demands made on them so as to avoid the risk of losing legitimacy by their failure to meet many demands. In developing states, democracy was seen as a source of political decay rather than development.

It was against this framework that most African states justified a politics of control rather than political participation. It was understood that in perfecting the instruments of control, governments could whittle down the populace’s demands and also establish the criteria for legitimacy without risking open public challenge.

Africa’s lost decade and the pitfalls of national consciousness

It was sadly clear at the end of the 1970s that something had gone awry. Across the continent, there was a deterioration of socio-economic conditions and a rise in inequality in astronomical proportions. While there had been substantive improvements in some sectors, the debt crisis of the early 1980s – the decade Shivji terms “Africa’s lost decade” – stymied all progress.¹¹

Shivji, the great votary of Africa’s nationalist leaders, and in particular of Nyerere, looks outside Africa to explain the failure of the development and nationalisation project. He blames neoliberalism. The African state, he finds, was incorrectly villainised. He however appears to shy away from a true confrontation with the fault lines running through his much beloved African state. He persuasively finds that neoliberal discourse is not blind to history but utterly oblivious of the agency of change in Africa – the state; yet he

⁸ Julius Nyerere, ‘How much Power for a Leader’? [1962] 7 AFR. REP. 5

⁹ KWAME NKUMAH, AFRICA MUST UNITE 82 (1964) (“In our present environment and circumstances our people associate primacy with power. The position of a titular President ... would not have been easy for them to grasp.”) The term “political kingdom” comes from Nkrumah’s famous statement made during the anti-colonial period: “Seek ye first the political kingdom and all things shall be added unto you.” It became the slogan of Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party.

¹⁰ Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Yale University Press, 1968

¹¹ Issa G Shivji, “The influence of ideas and the power relationships”.

avoids confronting the fact that the 'state' was not 'the people', but rather, by the 1980s, the loot and private property of those nationalist leaders he so greatly admired.

Professor Anyang Nyong'o does not display such naivety.¹² He challenges the Huntington narrative that pervaded Africa's early years by resorting to what Frantz Fanon terms "*the pitfalls of national consciousness*".¹³ Colonialism, according to Fanon, is not a binary opposition of coloniser and colonised. Instead, it is a complicated network of complicities and internal power imbalances between factions – not least, of course, the way in which nationalist leaders often replicate the systems of coercion and domination that shape colonial rule.

African nationalist leaders merely usurped the coloniser's role; preferring their own self-aggrandisement to the fulfilment of development goals. The rise in inequality among citizens immediately after independence to levels previously seen at the start of colonisation in countries such as Kenya is a testament to this.¹⁴ The new elite destroyed democratic institutions to privatise the state and personalise political power. Under their rule, democracy's form was whittled down to a framework for intra-bourgeois competition for political power.¹⁵ Their object was not development as Huntington assumed. It was power.

Nyong'o therefore finds that in its capacity to restrain arbitrary power, democracy had an instrumental value to Africa's development. He argues that without democratic rule, African states had failed to chart viable paths for development due to the lack of accountability between rulers and the ruled. The result was the elites' misuse of public resources, their accumulation of sovereign debt, their inability to generate economic surplus, and the increase in inequality among other factors curtailing development in African states. To Nyong'o, democratisation was a non-negotiable factor in development.

*Mkandawire and the instrumentalization of democracy*¹⁶

Nyong'o's argument provided intellectual scaffolding to the clamour for multipartyism in Africa in the 90s. Professor Thandika Mkandawire nevertheless took issue with it. First, he found no correlation between democracy and economic surplus. In fact, since accumulation demands delayed gratification, he argued that authoritarian rule, as evidenced by Malawi then, might be better equipped to ensure surplus than a democratic one. That repression had not led to accumulation in Africa was not itself proof of the fact that repressive regimes were disadvantageous for economic growth.

The issue, according to Mkandawire, was that political scientists in Africa truncated democracy to just "accountability" as Nyong'o had done. In turn, most democratic features such as freedom of association, the right to participation, and the right to dissent among others could be set aside in pursuit of growth. This democratic form, subsumed under the developmental problematique, acquired a purely instrumentalist function. Unfortunately, it could be easily challenged by evidence of rapid growth under fascist rule. Within that problematique, the characterisation of the state was whether it was developmental (good) or non-developmental (bad). Indeed, once so described, it became idealistic to the point of authoritarian structures of these regimes.

¹² See Anyang Nyong'o, 'Political Instability and the Prospects for Democracy in Africa', [1988] 13 (1) Africa Development / Afrique Et Développement 71

¹³ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Francois Maspero éditeur, 1961

¹⁴ See study by the author and others in <https://www.nation.co.ke/oped/blogs/dot9/franceschi/Post-pandemic-BBI-should-focus-on-a-stronger-state/2274464-5554268-j5xj8s/index.html>

¹⁵ Anyang Nyong'o, 'Political Instability'.

¹⁶ Thandika Mkandawire, 'Comments on Democracy and Political Instability', [1988] 13 (3) Africa Development / Afrique Et Développement 77

Consider Rwanda under Kagame today. It continues to make the argument to postpone democracy for economic growth, and has long been the darling of the West despite the regime's authoritarian overtones. Unfortunately, the pressure to prove its method correct may have led it to inflate its growth figures.¹⁷ Given the more probable likelihood that Rwanda's economy has stagnated, would there be a worthy justification for its illiberality?

To Mkandawire, economic growth was too precarious and fickle a concept on which to hang democracy. The struggle for democracy needed to be for full democracy in its own right. Why? Because a democratic state was the recognition of the legitimate rights of the African people to democratically map out the destinies of their own countries and to determine the rates and types of development that they want.

Development as Freedom

Democracy is freedom. The liberation and independence struggles in Africa's past were the peoples' struggles for democracy to map out the destinies of not only their countries but also themselves. According to Mkandawire, development could not be the simple GDP-growth version that Nyong'o adopted. Its meaning had to be broader, encompass this history of struggle for freedom, and therefore and inevitably, include equity and participation in governance. It is in fact democracy alone that could provide the set of values on which to assess any growth.

To audiences in the West, Mkandawire's arguments found a serendipitous echo from the East eleven years later, in the form of Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom*. He set out a nuanced and robust view of development as the process of expanding human freedom.¹⁸

Kenya's recent conversation on revenue sharing allocation between its levels of government is illustrative.¹⁹ The new Constitution creates a devolved government and mandates revenue sharing between the national government and the counties. The question recently was whether to use a formula or not in the allocation of revenue. An autocratic government would have made that decision "efficiently" but here, the matter spurred great national debate as it reflected the nation's struggle against political tokenism. The independence state purposely underdeveloped some regions as punishment for their opposition politics. How national government allocates revenue today – an economic question really – can only be legitimately decided by our own democratic struggle.

What Sen and Mkandawire were clear about and what Kenyans are affirming, is that there is no development outside of freedom. The choice between the economy and democracy is a false choice. How we develop ourselves and our economies are self-determining questions that are legitimately, democratically decided. Matter of fact, Africa's choices have long been stagnation under tyranny or stagnation under democracy. Without hesitation, we choose the latter.

¹⁷ See 'Has Rwanda been fiddling its numbers?' *The Economist*, (Kigali August 15, 2019)

¹⁸ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Oxford University Press, 1961

¹⁹ See David Ndi, 'One Man, One Shilling Politics: A Return to Inequitable Development, Marginalisation and Exclusion,' *The Elephant*, (Nairobi, July 28, 2020)