

No time for complacency

Getting governance right for development in Africa¹

David Booth², Africa Power and Politics Programme

The era of pessimism about development in Africa is over. Almost everywhere, and not least in Commonwealth Africa, there is a degree of buoyancy about economic and political prospects that has not been seen since the end of the 1970s. We should be thankful for this new mood, but wary of the complacency that may come in its wake.

Neither in economic affairs nor in politics is Africa yet firmly on the right track. Economies need transformation, not just growth, and that calls for a policy vision and drive that, with rare exceptions, political systems are not currently providing. This ought to be profoundly worrying to anyone with any degree of responsibility for shaping Africa's future.

Too much of a mood swing?

The bleak imagery that used to be conveyed by most external and internal assessments of African development trajectories was always somewhat exaggerated. Since the turn of the millennium, this imagery has become increasingly irrelevant as high economic growth rates, significant public health gains and more or less peaceful conditions have come to characterise much of the region. Not only are economies growing but electoral politics and civic freedoms are becoming entrenched, and the lives of even ordinary people are improving slowly, not everywhere to be sure, but in many African countries.

It is no bad thing that the old pessimism has been swept aside. However, it should be replaced with heightened ambition, not an easier acceptance of the status quo. Too much of the new mood – I would argue – is based on a rather superficial appreciation of the challenges now confronting low-income Africa. I refer not to the many particular issues that remain to be addressed – from Africa's growing involvement in global criminality, and the burdens of avoidable diseases and premature death, to the threats posed by climate change and premature urbanisation³ – important as these issues are. Rather, my concern is with the political and economic framework within which these and many other particular challenges are to be tackled.

Economics and politics: going deeper

On economic prospects, one of Africa's most respected economists, K.Y. Amoako, has reminded us that sustained high growth creates opportunities that would not otherwise exist, but is insufficient on its own to produce an economic transformation. Economic transformation – growth plus structural change – depends on how well the opportunities provided by renewed growth are used to build skills and

technological capabilities, leading to widely shared improvements in productivity and to the conquest of new markets (Amoako, 2011).

What Amoako does not say explicitly is that the policy requirements of making the current growth spurt sustainable by turning it into a genuine economic transformation are considerable. More serious, such policies appear to barely register on the radar of the current generation of African political leaders.

This by itself should suggest that there are few grounds for complacency regarding the state of politics and governance in Africa. A common view these days is that after an extended period of abysmal performance, several African political systems are now doing pretty well in a number of respects. Human rights abuses are less common and less flagrant, freedoms of speech and assembly are more widely respected, and more or less peaceful transfers of power following more or less legitimate elections are becoming more and more usual.

These things are true, and the point of this article is not to quibble about the trend or dwell on the exceptions. As with accelerated economic growth, the bigger worry is how many well-informed people are content with the superficial progress and, therefore, unwilling to probe into some of the rather large remaining challenges.

My worries about complacency arise partly from the emerging findings of an international research programme on Africa Power and Politics, which I have the honour to lead (www.institutions-africa.org). These findings point to the critical significance of a set of factors that hardly get a mention in many treatments of the advance of liberalism and democracy in Africa. They are significant from the point of view of the sustainability of current levels of relative peace and stability in the region, and also from the angle of how to get the policies required for economic transformation.

To return for a moment to the economics, the Asian experience in the period since most African Commonwealth countries gained their independence clearly indicates a number of preconditions for the achievement of broad-based growth and structural change. As Amoako puts it, they include:

- a national vision imparting a shared sense of purpose;
- government policies facilitating industrial upgrading;
- robust strategic planning;
- effective mass and elite education;



Zambians clamber to catch a glimpse of their democratically elected president, Michael Sata, September 2011

- public investment in rural infrastructure and external aid targeted at such investments; and
- public-private partnership across a range of activities.

The first – national vision – is arguably the most critical precondition and the one upon which the others are built. It is also the precondition that has been most lacking in Africa. Why?

Sources of development vision

Some of the answers commonly given to this question have no historical foundation. There is nothing distinctive about African culture or state formation which on its own explains why African countries have on the whole failed to match the economic performance of their counterparts in Asia. Research based on paired comparisons of sub-Saharan and Southeast Asian countries carried out by a team led from the University of Leiden (www.trackingdevelopment.net) has confirmed that, at the beginning, Asian countries were burdened with no less of the classic social barriers to modernisation and no less of the big-man leadership style and ‘patrimonial’, or clientelistic, politics than their African equivalents.

On the other hand, there have been marked differences in the way political incentives have worked from leadership levels downwards, and these differences are even more important than is usually assumed. The key requirement for establishing a ‘national vision and shared sense of purpose’ is that ruling elites are relieved of pressures to respond only

to short-term political exigencies and acquire an incentive to look to the long term.

This happened in a number of countries, first in Northeast Asia, and later in Southeast Asia, as a result of national crises or threats, often including large amounts of violence. After these episodes, elites voluntarily, or under strong pressure from an armed leadership, came together to suspend their disagreements for the sake of a shared interest in national preservation.

This has rarely happened in sub-Saharan Africa, and least of all in Commonwealth Africa. Usually, elites have remained fragmented and, as a consequence, the pattern of elite behaviour, in the economy and in the polity, has remained resolutely short-termist – free of any strong vision that is focused on the long term.

The quality of democracy

It is unreservedly a good thing that international wars and civil violence are less common in Africa today than in either Asia or Africa in the past. On the other hand, it is vital to grasp the implications of this pattern of difference across African and Asian experiences. Most importantly, we need to be clear about how it challenges the complacent consensus about how governance is progressing in low-income African countries. It suggests probing the functioning of African political systems at a much deeper level than is usual in discussions of such matters.

It is good that most African countries are now ruled as multi-party democracies, formally at least; it is also good that the dictatorships have gone. But, in a way, that parallels what Amoako says about economic growth – we need to be concerned about the *quality* of the democracy as well as with the headline numbers. In a poor developing country, the most important dimension of the quality of its democracy is surely whether it delivers effective developmental leadership. At the core of this is the question of achieving an elite consensus about national vision and the suspension of short-termism.

In successful Asian economies, fundamental elite consensus was achieved under dictatorial or dominant-party regimes. In some of them, it was maintained when, as much richer countries, they went down the road of multi-party politics. In most of sub-Saharan Africa, elite fragmentation and resulting short-termism have been features of dictatorships and democracies alike. However, there have been exceptions.

APP research (Cammack and Kelsall, 2011; Kelsall, 2011a) has identified a limited number of ‘developmental-patrimonial’ regimes. The majority of these occurred in the immediate post-independence period and were led by fathers of the nation, suggesting perhaps that such regimes may be restricted to single-party arrangements under outstanding personalities. Possible examples among current regimes include one large non-Commonwealth country, Ethiopia, and one small Commonwealth member state, Rwanda. In both cases, long-term vision is accompanied by strong leadership

and at least some degree of institutionalised political competition (Booth and Golooba-Mutebi, 2011; Kelsall, 2011b; Vaughan and Gebremichael, 2011).

Whatever one's view on these different kinds of exceptions, the big question today is whether democratic politics can deliver a sufficient level of elite consensus on the fundamentals for economic transformation to occur. The risk is that African democracies will get locked into political short-termism to such an extent that the transition from economic growth to economic transformation is delayed indefinitely. There is no more important challenge on the horizon than this.

The perverse logic of winner takes all

Consider how this issue is posed in two Commonwealth countries whose trajectories influence disproportionately the fates of other countries in their respective sub-regions, Kenya and Nigeria. In both cases, national politics remains extremely short-termist, almost entirely ideology-free, and largely driven by jockeying for power ahead of the next election by the figureheads of ethno-political power blocs⁴.

There is much public debate among Kenyans and Nigerians about constitutions and the quality of electoral processes. There is almost none about the particular problem that I have been emphasising. Under current arrangements, all of the contenders and their supporters face a significant risk of being completely excluded from the spoils of office under the next government. As a consequence, none of them can afford to suspend or moderate their pursuit of short-term gains. Those that might wish to mitigate the harm that is done to the public good in this process face a collective action problem that is insuperable under the current rules of the game.

It is not democracy, but a winner-takes-all democracy within an ethno-regionally divided polity that has this effect. All the same, the solutions are not obvious. The hopes currently being pinned on improving electoral processes in Nigeria, and on the recently adopted constitution in Kenya, are legitimate. However, I believe they miss the main point.

There is a continuing tendency in both countries to treat political institutionalisation superficially, as if the formalities of political competition were equivalent to the substance. The question that really needs to be posed is what, if any⁵, variant of power-sharing or compacted democracy would be capable of liberating all contenders from the compulsion to sacrifice long-term national interests for short-term partial interests.

From there to a dynamic developmental leadership based on an elite consensus about fundamental goals and rules would be a further step that could not be guaranteed. But equally it seems unlikely that this step will ever be taken if there is no effort to moderate current styles of politicking. This is

fundamental. If Kenyans and Nigerians are not capable of tackling this issue, the mood is certainly too complacent about the prospects for social peace and transformative development in these two key Commonwealth countries, and probably many others besides.

References

- Amoako, K.Y. (2011). Transforming Africa – Start Now, We Can't Wait, *African Business* 45(377): 24-27.
- Booth, D. and Golooba-Mutebi, F. (2011). *Developmental Patrimonialism? The Case of Rwanda*. Working Paper 16. London: Africa Power and Politics Programme.
- Cammack, D. and Kelsall, T. (2011). Neo-Patrimonialism, Institutions and Economic Growth: The Case of Malawi, 1964-2009, *IDS Bulletin* 42(2): 88-96.
- Ellis, S. (2011). *Season of Rains: Africa in the World*. London: Hurst.
- Kelsall, T. (2011a). Rethinking the Relationship Between Neo-Patrimonialism and Economic Development in Africa, *IDS Bulletin* 42(2): 76-87.
- Kelsall, T. (2011b). *Developmental Patrimonialism? Rethinking Business and Politics in Africa*. Policy Brief 02. London: Africa Power and Politics Programme.
- Khamisi, J. (2011). *The Politics of Betrayal: Diary of a Kenyan Legislator*. Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing.
- LeVan, A.C. (2011). Power Sharing and Inclusive Politics in Africa's Uncertain Democracies, *Governance* 24(1).
- Lewis, P.M. (2007). *Oil, Politics, and Economic Change in Indonesia and Nigeria*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Mutua, M. (2009). *Kenya's Quest for Democracy: Taming Leviathan*. Kampala: Fountain Publishers.
- Smith, D.J. (2007). *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Vaughan, S. and Gebremichael, M. (2011). *Rethinking Business and Politics in Ethiopia: The Role of EFFORT, the Endowment Fund for the Rehabilitation of Tigray*. Research Report 2. London: Africa Power and Politics Programme.
- Wrong, M. (2009). *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle Blower*. London: HarperCollins.

Endnotes

- 1 I am grateful to Tim Kelsall and Sue Martin for comments on a draft.
- 2 David Booth (d.booth@odi.org.uk) is a Fellow of the Overseas Development Institute, London, and leads the Africa Power and Politics Programme (APPP), a five-year research programme dedicated to 'discovering institutions that work for poor people'. APPP brings together research organisations and think-tanks in France, Ghana, Niger, Uganda, the UK and the USA. It is undertaking research in 19 African countries and is supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Irish Aid.
- 3 On much of which, an excellent recent review is Ellis (2011).
- 4 As vividly described by, among others, Joe Khamisi (2011), Peter M. Lewis (2007), Makau Mutua (2009), Daniel Jordan Smith (2007) and Michela Wrong (2009).
- 5 It has been convincingly argued that current variants of democratic power-sharing, especially those originating in a flawed election, tend to produce the opposite of the outcomes we are looking for in this discussion (LeVan, 2011).