Democracy and civil society in africa: prospects, issues and challenges

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For the last eight years, Africa has been involved in what many observers believe is a veritable "democratic revolution". Throughout the continent, authoritarian regimes have recently crumbled or felt the pressures to liberalise their polities as well as their economies.

The demise of authoritarianism has been accompanied by a vocal popular repudiation of personal rule, elitist domination, ethnic entrepreneurship and official corruption. These shifts in Africa's political landscape raise fundamental challenges for its political development. The era of political liberalisation, constitutional change and shifts to competitive electoral regimes do certainly not guarantee nor ensure transition to sustainable democratic rule in Africa.

At a very fundamental level, democratisation generally refers to the development of more egalitarian social relations and the elimination of autocratic structures. The state lessens its economic involvement, civil society and social economic and political associations are allowed to flourish and widespread habituation to democratic values norms and procedures are al-

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lowed to develop. Africa is still grappling with the challenges of democratisation. Civil society although newly invigorated, is still particularly weak and ineffective in many African settings.

The decline of weak predatory states and autocratic rule has certainly opened opportunities for the formation of civil society. For most African countries, basic issues of state authority, national identity, ethnicity and social cohesion have not been resolved in the decades since independence.

The emergence of civil society in Africa is still very much a nascent historical process. Throughout much of Sub-Saharan Africa, the nature of ethnically based domestic social formations and the character of state society relations provide a weak and tenuous basis for the emergence of civil society.

By virtue of their relations with elites, disengagement from the polity and internal fragmentation, private interests in Africa have not acted as constituent parts of a common civil realm or public sphere. The central institutions of civil society are quiescent or fragmented in most African countries. The democratic project in Africa therefore entails basic changes in popular participation and nurturing associational life in political matters.

Let me briefly examine the concept of civil society. It is often used to refer to autonomous organised groups bent on challenging authoritarian regimes to open the political system. Jean Francois Bayart, the French scholar on Africa, defines civil society as the political space between the household and the state.

It is outside the formal political arena but it can be drawn into that arena in times of political crisis. Civil society is the sub-set of society writ large. It is defined by its agenda and is created when autonomous associations adopt and act upon a civic agenda.

Groupings that comprise civil society consist of intellectuals, artists, professionals, the business sector, organised labour, church associations, women and students organisations and so

on. During the drive for independence such groups provided the support base for nationalist parties.

Crawford Young, another eminent Africanist, suggests that this nationalist period could be considered the golden age in the evolution of Africa's civil society. After independence, autonomous civic associations were either co-opted by mainstream political organisations or repressed by autocratic regimes.

The common societal response was a retreat into the solidarity and resources of ethnic communities and primary groups and an abdication of the public sphere. In the most extreme instances, this was manifest as a virtual "exit" from the state and the economy. Alternatively, many groups and individuals adapted to the exigencies of patrimonial rule, using clientelist ties with state elites or appealing as supplicants for special consideration and favours from the ruler, whether an individual patron, a ruling military junta or a dominant party.

The post 1989 wave of democratisation has facilitated the re-emergence of social movements such as those typically represented in civil society. Political leaders in Africa have in many cases voluntarily opened up their political systems or have been forced by circumstances to do so. Since 1989, African civil society has not only grown but has changed in nature. It has become emboldened and focused on the spoils of national polities. In many instances, civil society has been the decisive catalyst in regime change.

Many observers claim that a vibrant and mobilised civil society is the key to the promotion of democracy in Africa. But this has to be understood in the context of state and society relations to which I now would like to turn.

In most of Sub-Saharan Africa, the establishment of sovereign bureaucratic states was an outcome of colonialism. Colonial development engendered very few underpinnings for the emergence of a viable civil society. Colonial domination of

whichever variety –British, French or Portuguese– fostered social division and political exclusion.

European administrators arbitrarily included diverse sociocultural groups in their territories, and the colonial bureaucracy was alien in ideology, personnel and authoritarian in its governance. Colonial states, possessing limited penetrative and administrative capacities, were typically distant from their subject populations and did not engendered state consolidation or effective hegemony.

These contours of state–society relations persisted beyond the colonial era so much so that the states, economies and societies of the post independence era have impeded the formation of a distinct civic space.

As such African states have been distinguished by their comparative weakness and fragmentation and the contemporary state in Africa typically exercises partial and intermittent domination over society, thus reflecting minimal internal cohesion.

They rely on patrimonial systems are sustained by individual rulers who control access to sine cures, favours and state revenues. In decentralised patterns, public resources are ubiquitously appropriated by a diffuse political-commercial elite. The imperatives of patrimonial rule pose inherent dilemmas for the construction of a democratic civil society.

In essence, patrimonialism makes no distinction between public and private interests and roles. Pervasive corruption, ethnic favouritism and nepotism have undermined the very substance and neutrality of public power.

Let me now turn to some of the economic dimensions of democratic reform. African economies have provided a weak basis for the aggregation of private interests.

The tenuous spread of market relations and commodity production has given rise to widespread societal fragmentation and marginality. Many African economies are still comprised largely of self-provisioning peasant households with substantial capac-

ity to remain aloof from the formal economy. Markets for capital, labour and commodities are regionalised, ethnically segmented and often localised.

Society is weakly incorporated in national exchange and authority relations, giving rise to inchoate class identities and uncertain functional linkages. The prevalence of rentier activities fosters an intimate interdependence among state and private-sector, thus blurring public-private boundaries and impeding the formation of autonomous means of accumulation.

Alongside rentier groups, these exists an extensive zone of informal economic activity that is not incorporated in the state domain. Large parallel economies have placed enormous resources and networks outside the reach of the central state.

In short, two distinct tendencies in state-society relations are rooted in the economic structure: first, an ambivalent dependence upon state and second, a parochial disengagement from the state. Neither of these tendencies promote the assertion of corporate, private interests or the articulation of an open public sphere.

I want to deal briefly with the social character of African societies. Most are heterogeneous and vertically segmented. Primary and corporate group ties have undermined the development of functional or class linkages.

Kinship, local and ethnic affinities typically cut across or subsume other social divisions and consequently, class identities have remained weak or embryonic. Ethnic pluralism and the prevalence of invidious communal politics in Africa has caused deep social fragmentation rather than integration.

Since the late colonial period, political mobilisation has co-incided with the accentuation of communal, ethnic and factional allegiances. Furthermore, the parochial basis of associational life has impeded the process of inclusion and engagement.

Let me conclude by addressing this question: How do we assess the possibilities for the creation of civil societies in Africa and the establishment of democracy? The ongoing challenge of reforming African state structures is essential to the creation of new political communities.

Democratic institutions and an autonomous civil society can be guaranteed only by an effective state. Ensuring personal and civil rights, respect for legal convention and the rule of law and the extension of effective citizenship are all political conditions which reside with the state. These conditions are a *sine qua non* for the emergence of a vibrant civil society.

Finally, it is important to note the current absence of a viable political society in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. This is perhaps the most essential missing link in the democratic equation. A stratum of intellectuals, entrepreneurs, organisers and politicians who can mediate popular interests, link societal groups with the state and sustain new forms of political procedure will be essential to the democratic project in Africa.

The democratisation process has set in motion the restructuring of state-society relations. These now seems to be more of a palpable normative commitment by a range of political leaders to democratic values and procedures.

These changed attitudes signal an erosion of the prevailing charismatic and millenarian premises of political leadership and an abandonment of the obsolete thinking and ideas about glorifying single party rule.

Recent political changes in Africa have also reflected a new international context. Without neglecting domestic sources and pressures of reform, it is clear that impulses for democratisation have been encouraged by the diffusion effects of democratic transitions in other regions as well as by the changing terrain of the global political economy and the unleashed forces of globalisation.

Influential models of political change in Latin America and Eastern Europe reflect an important role for civil society and independent associations.

The courses of political struggle and reform in Africa since 1989 suggests a variety of possible outcomes, ranging from the survival of authoritarian rulers to a protracted cycle of liberalisation or repression to the successful consolidation of democratic government.

I, however, am an eternal optimist. While being mindful of the challenges and problems I have attempted to outline, I remain hopeful about Africa's democratic prospects as we move into the new millennium.

Indeed, our deputy president Thabo Mbeki has articulated the notion of an African Renaissance and this evokes renewed possibilities for the constitution of a genuine civil society and the consolidation of real democracy in Africa.