

Blue Skies in the Dark Continent?

Aiman Zarul, 31 March 2012

Two pieces of journalism on Africa caught my eye this week. One was an upbeat article by the *New York Times*' West Africa cognoscente, Adam Nossiter, entitled "Across Africa, Steady Steps Toward Democracy". The other was a less sanguine take by *The Economist*, ominously titled "Strife in the Sahel: A perfect desert storm". Together, both articles attend to a host of phenomena that have more or less colored narratives on Africa: elections, terrorism, *coups d'état*, poverty and associated famine, unemployment, civil society, democracy and dictatorship – both its military and civilian variants. It was in many ways a political economy student's checklist of "most testable concepts".

To be sure, both articles' contrasting tones stem from the individual African countries they choose to focus on. In his article, Nossiter celebrates the recent blossoming of democracy across the Dark Continent, using Senegal's civil disposal of Abdoulaye Wade as an aspirational benchmark for other African polities. Conversely, *The Economist's* despondent analysis of Mali, where a spontaneous and unpopular military coup has been compounded by Islamist insurgency in the northern Tombouctou and Kidal regions, spins a script far more familiar to Africa observers. Despite the positive news that has been coming out of Africa as of late (most of it sadly glossed over), public and even academic perceptions of its constituent polities remain in dire want of rehabilitation, and this can be partly blamed on the hegemony of disparaging journalism on Africa – reinforced by nasty events such as the Malian coup. Academic ambivalence in turn stems from Africa's unflattering image as a place where Western sociological, political and economic theories about development are sent to die. Whereas wisdoms about development-driven democratization yielded handsome dividends in Eastern Europe and parts of Latin America, they have had tragically little purchase in Africa: the continent's political landscape remains littered with rentier states that wield and readily use the financial muscle to co-opt opposition groups (or buy the private armies to eliminate them altogether), kleptocratic dictatorships that are immune to conventional economic push-pull pressures, and ethnic entrepreneurs who dangerously manipulate identity contours in the pursuit of personal power.

Or has that begun to change? Nossiter thinks so. He points to the ousting of Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo after the election of Alassane Ouattara in December 2010, the failure of Liberian opposition candidate Winston Tubman to hijack a seemingly fair election in 2011, and similar felicitous scenarios in Nigeria, Ghana and Zambia – not to mention the Arab Spring, whose successes were most pronounced in (if not confined to) the Maghrebi states of North Africa. Now Nossiter reckons that Senegal has done one better over the rest: reading like a class essay on Przeworskian democratization theory, he praises the outcome of the Senegalese election, in which an opposition candidate defeated the long-standing, autocratically-inclined incumbent at the ballot box and was able to assume office as the new head of government. As Adam Przeworski counseled in his seminal book on democratization, "only if an opposition is allowed to compete, win, and assume office is a regime democratic". The democratic moment for Senegal, by this assessment, was when Wade realized that he had lost the election, and conceded to his inveterate rival and former colleague in government, Macky Sall.

But all this talk about democracy implicates the question: what makes a democracy? Academic responses have tended to converge around economics. Seymour Lipset believed that economic development was central to democratization, reflected in rising wealth. Barrington Moore stressed the importance of a politically conscious middle class, while Robert Dahl conditioned true electoral democracy on rights, liberties and safeguards. Juan Linz believed that an economic society that effectively mediates the interests of the state and the market combines with an autonomous civil society and political community and a bureaucratized economic society to produce *consolidated* democracy, while Przeworski argued that development preserves existing democracies but plays only a marginal role in hatching the conditions for actual democratization.

Save for spurts of mineral-fueled development in the 1960s (and even this was stunted by superpower geopoliticking), hardly any of these conditions for democracy previously obtained in Africa. Moreover, since the 1980s and through the 1990s, great swathes of the continent have been beholden to foreign aid, their national economies masticated by the cumulative ravages of civil war, famine, corruption and development-rejecting cultural philosophies. Today, a fragile but discernible peace prevails over much of Africa, and as reformist governments begin to focus on getting their economic houses in order and burgeoning trade creates room for countercyclical monetary policies, a consensus is beginning to emerge that perhaps the economic conditions for democracy are finally gaining a foothold in the economics black hole that Africa once was.

One of the progenitors of that consensus is none other than *The Economist*. In a glowing report on African economies in December last year, the newspaper charted a new course for Africa moored in ideas of social progress and economic development. Were they around today to digest the report, Lipset would have approved that "African governments have invested more wisely (than in the 1980s), notably in infrastructure", and Moore would have likewise welcomed that "a genuine middle class is emerging" across the continent. Contemporary Huntington would no doubt see the prevalence of political stability as aligning with his own bibliography, while Przeworski would observe that if it was indeed true that "by 2015, (the number of African households with annual incomes above \$3,000) is expected to reach 100 million (from the current 60 million)", this would only help to prolong the lifespans of Africa's poor democracies. Others in the policy world lend rare credibility to this optimistic prognosis. The IMF expects sub-Saharan belt economies to grow by 5.75% in 2012 - a forecast shared by World Bank managing director Sri Mulyani Indrawati, who in an opinion article placed sub-Saharan economic expansion at 6%. And the most encouraging part of this observation, as Steven Radelet (of the Center for Global Development) points out in his book *Emerging Africa*, is that there are no nation-specific patterns in this growth trend. He panegyricizes seventeen sub-Saharan countries' successes in reining in rampant poverty, institutionalizing politics along accountable interfaces and raising productivity levels, and reasons that the winning strategies employed are as equally applicable in Abuja as in Addis Ababa. Gone, it seems, are the days when growth among African countries could be said to be exogenously conditioned on a country's unique circumstances (as many a dictator would still like to argue); many of today's African states have arguably 'graduated' to the level where sustainable growth is the product of sensible, endogenously-designed policies.

But by using economics as the overarching metric of progress in Africa, are we setting ourselves up for yet more disappointment? Admittedly, the realist tone struck by this week's *Economist* article is perfectly warranted as it considers important non-economic variables that have been overlooked in the euphoria of perceived economic progress. Many of these variables have historically determined the haphazard and at times violent trajectories of African states, and ought not to be relegated in focal significance to economic factors. Take Africa's newest state, South Sudan. Intense border skirmishes between Sudanese and South Sudanese forces and proxy groups evoke unsavory memories of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war of the late 1990s. South Sudan's fledgling democracy may be particularly commendable when one considers how poor the country is (per capita GNI of \$984, according to the South's National Bureau of Statistics), but there are legitimate concerns that Juba's democracy is a fragile one tiptoeing precariously over a bed of nails. A protracted war of attrition with Sudan, the escalation of ethnic violence between the rival Murle, Dinka and Nuer tribes or the collapse of the weak central government and ensuing power vacuum would place tremendous pressure on South Sudan's polity, reorient popular appetites toward authoritarian stability over democratic liberty and propel a nationalist ideologue or rogue general(s) into power. Even if Juba's democracy endures, there is too great a temptation for local elites to use the country's hydrocarbon wealth to govern by co-optation rather than by compromise, utilizing a network of rents, cronies and destabilizing ethnic gerrymandering. It can be validly argued that despite being Africa's youngest state, South Sudan faces a host of socio-political challenges that have vexed African states since the onset of decolonization. And to paraphrase the *Economist* article, Mali's sudden authoritarian relapse, despite its consistent 5.5% annual GDP growth (which, Radelet reminds us, has slashed poverty by one-third since the mid-

1990s), is a sobering reminder of the autonomous (as opposed to converging) trajectories that economic and political forces tend to take in Africa.

Happily, this is unlikely, and for reasons other than naked economics: South Sudan's democracy is a product of war and identity-based conflagration. Its leaders consciously opted for western-style democracy as a means of decoupling the new country from its unhappy past, much like Kosovo and Timor Leste (poor but functioning democracies). That these countries' secessions from their parent nations were underwritten, engineered and guided by international institutions also helps explain, and will continue to insure, their democratic moorings. Elsewhere, functional government makes up for less explicit democratic ambitions. A deal between Senegal's secular politicians and the *marabouts* or religious Islamic leaders facilitates a rare concordat between temporal and spiritual elites in a predominantly Muslim society – a feat that wealthier and more cosmopolitan Muslim countries such as Indonesia and Tunisia continue to grapple towards.

For the first time since the 1960s at least, things may finally be looking up for large parts of Africa. To be sure, detractors, like the author(s) of this week's *Economist* article, validly suggest that it is because this is Africa (given its tortured recent past) that we ought to be circumspect in our optimism. Earlier this month, the UNHCR warned that the number of Malian refugees driven into neighboring countries by clashes in Mali's north had reached 80,000, while a burgeoning *Boko Haram* force in Nigeria has compounded preexisting inter-communal tensions and threatens to destabilize weak neighbors such as Niger and Chad. Further afield, the Democratic Republic of Congo's seemingly perennial instability continues to elude resolution, while the prospect of a Muslim Brotherhood victory in an imminent Egyptian election raises questions about the Military Council's response and the endurance of Egypt's infant democracy. But it is also precisely *because* of Africa's historical baggage that we can afford to, and in fact should, view developments in relative, optimistic terms. Nossiter, to his credit, does exactly this. And to add to his analysis, perhaps one of the most promising changes to Africa's political architecture is the growing appreciation among the continent's democratizing, developing states that their interests materially converge. From Somalia to Mali and the Ivory Coast, ideologically consonant African governments have pooled resources to solve problems that their ideologically dissonant predecessors (most of them self-interested dictatorships) allowed to fester, even promoted. As institutionalism and the rule of law take hold in many African capitals (the AU has played a pivotal role in Somalia, Ivory Coast, among others, and Burkina Faso and Niger are expected to defer to the International Court of Justice to resolve a long-standing border dispute), perhaps the end of bad news' hegemony in the Dark Continent is truly, and credibly, nigh.

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Notes

- Adam Nossiter, "Across Africa, Steady Steps Toward Democracy", *The New York Times* (March 26, 2012).
- "Strife in the Sahel: A perfect desert storm", *The Economist* (March 17, 2012).
- "The sun shines bright", *The Economist* (December 3, 2011).
- Seymour M. Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy" (*The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 53, No. 1, March 1959), pp. 69-105.
- Adam Przeworski et al, *Democracy and Development: Political Institutions and Well-Being in the World, 1950-1990* (2000), New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (1972), New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Juan J. Linz, Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Democracy* (1996), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Sri Mulyani Indrawati, "The Future of Development Aid", Project Syndicate (November 11, 2011); available at <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/the-future-of-development-aid>
- Steven Radelet, *Emerging Africa: How 17 Countries are Leading the Way* (2010), Washington, DC: Center for Global Development.