The Challenges of Democracy and Democratisation in Southern Africa

Beverly L Peters[1]

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, Africa is entering a new era where its leaders, for the most part, espouse the need for democracy, good governance and economic development. These leaders have committed themselves and their countries to this goal through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) and the broader-based African Union (AU). The Nepad charter 'undertakes to respect global standards of democracy' and includes a Democracy and Political Governance Initiative which provides a range of indicators such as political pluralism, the existence of several political parties and workers' unions, and free and fair elections.

Democracy is a cornerstone of Africa's plan for rebirth. The key question is — What challenges face democracy and its consolidation on the continent, and specifically in Southern Africa? This essay does not examine Southern African democracy in terms of Nepad indicators or any other pre-determined criteria, but rather aims to review the challenges and trends of democratisation, and to speculate how these may affect the drive towards sustainable economic development and poverty reduction on the subcontinent.

Comparing democracies

Mainstream Western and some African political scientists point to a set of quantitative indicators to define 'democracy'. These indicators centre on a variety of issues, among them free and fair elections, freedom of the press, separation of powers, so-called checks and balance, and related accountability. Other indicators include the existence of a multiparty democracy with a bona fide opposition that contributes to debate, and the ability of the local population to participate in that debate.

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[1] DR BEVERLY L PETERS is an assistant professor at the Washington Semester and the School of International Service, American University, Washington DC, and a research associate at the SAIIA. The author wishes to thank Gareth Elliot for his insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay. The views expressed here are those of the author.

Qualitative researchers will tell you that such indicators are difficult to pinpoint at the best of times, even in Western societies. Is the press 'free' in the US, where it has become politically dangerous to criticise President Bush's war on terror? Did Japan have a bona fide multiparty democracy under the Democratic Liberal Party? Does the accountability of leaders really stamp out corruption in any Western democracy?

Needless to say, the majority of countries in Africa do not fare well on the above qualitative indicators of democracy. A cursory review of local newspapers in Southern Africa will show even to the novice that most of these countries are not democracies in the Western sense. Elections are characterised by intimidation in Namibia and Zimbabwe; labour unions battle to survive in Swaziland; and some opposition members in South Africa claim the country is evolving into a one-party state without checks and balances.

However, the relevant point is not whether African democracy is similar to, or different from, Western democracy. Southern Africa grew from a different historical condition: of course democracy there will mature differently from that in the West. The nature of democracy may even mature differently from region to region and country to country. Also, governments in the region are relatively young. Namibia's democracy is a mere 12 years old, Malawi and Zambia are less than 10 years down the path of democratisation after decades of authoritarian rule, and South Africa has had a non-racial government only since 1994.

The point to be made here is not that Southern African democracies do not fare well in terms of Western indicators of democracy, but rather that the current system of governance in Southern African countries, be it democracy or any other form of government, is presently challenged in ways that governments in Western countries have not been recently. The crucial question is whether or not governance as it exists in Southern Africa can meet those challenges. Are governments able to meet the demands of economic globalisation, while at the same time responding to the social development needs of their countries? Will governments be able to meet the requirements of sustainable economic development and poverty reduction as envisaged by Nepad?

Southern African democracy:
The cases of Namibia, Zimbabwe and Malawi

Arguably one of the most important challenges facing Southern Africa is the nature and structure of the state, and the inevitable influence this will have on democratisation.

The form of state current in Southern Africa was forged during colonial occupation. The British, Portuguese, German and Belgian colonial powers used an indirect form of despotism to govern, which served to favour certain 'trusted' leaders over others, thus entrenching power hierarchies in rural areas. After the end of colonialism (or apartheid in the case of South Africa), local leaders were unwilling to relinquish their newly-found power, and therefore reluctant to push for democratic reform or democratic participation in politics. Without reform of local leadership, democratisation as characterised by the participation of local communities will not be easily achieved in Southern Africa.[2] This can be seen in Namibia, where local leaders in ruling party strongholds are calling for the second changing of that country's constitution to allow President Sam Nujoma to run for a fourth term in office.

Local leaders in the rural areas in the north of the country tend to be the centres of power for political parties, given that the majority of the population lives outside the towns.[3] The re-election of Nujoma would sideline the rule of law and the Namibian constitution. Moreover, some delegates at the 2002 South West African People's Organisation (SWAPO) congress pointed out that the changing of the constitution would counter the trend towards democratisation in the region, and could lead to undesirable economic ramifications, as has happened in Zimbabwe. Should parliament change the constitution again, analysts predict that Nujoma will indeed win the upcoming elections and further entrench himself as another 'big man' on the subcontinent.

The 'big man' syndrome is in many ways related to the nature of colonialism and the struggles that occurred during the liberation era.[4] Several Southern African governments are personalised around their leaders, bearing the all too ominous overtones of past authoritarian 'presidents for life', or leaders who are reluctant to leave office, such as Nujoma in Namibia, Mugabe in Zimbabwe and (although deposed in the 1990s) Banda in Malawi. These men came to power as a result of liberation struggles which gave rise to nationalist leaders whose power bases were in the rural areas. Because their support comes from rural areas that refuse to democratise, big men continue to rule with little opposition. People remain loyal to the liberation party on the grounds of its role in the struggle to overthrow colonialism (or in the case of South

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[2] Mamdani M, *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

[3] Glover S, 'Namibia's recent elections: Something new or same old story?', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 7, 2, Winter 2000, pp.141–149.

[4] Russell A, *Big Men Little People: Encounters in Africa*. London: MacMillan, 2000.

Africa, apartheid) rather than its political platform.[5] Constituencies may also support big men because of regional, ethnic and religious ties.

Voters tend to keep these so-called big men in power as long as their basic needs are met, whether or not a 'democratic' process exists. Governments change only when the standard of living falls so dramatically that a change in government becomes warranted. The new parties in power tend to represent new and improved big men rather than politicians with bona fide platforms.[6]

An interesting example is found in Zimbabwe. Traditional Shona leaders for the most part support Mugabe and Zanu–PF as the Shona-dominated party that led the liberation struggle. In the past these traditional leaders garnered the support of local constituencies, and thus an ethnic vote. However, in recent years the standard of living has dropped to such an extent in both the Shona and Ndebele areas in Zimbabwe that people are no longer taking their cue from traditional leaders and big men. As a result, the Mugabe government has turned to bribery (witness the current nature of the land reform movement) and intimidation (as was the case in the 2000 referendum and 2002 presidential elections, when soldiers in Fifth Brigade uniforms thronged the streets of Bulawayo) to retain political power.

In Malawi issues of regionalism, ethnicity and religion have characterised politics and elections since the collapse of the Banda regime in the early 1990s. Whereas rising and widespread dissatisfaction with the Banda regime led to its collapse, it was regional and ethnic loyalties that dictated voter support in the 1994 elections, when[7]

> [t]he Yao voted for Muluzi, the Chewa for Banda, and the Tumbuka for Chihana…while other tribal groups voted mainly against Banda for whichever of the other two was nearest in geographical proximity to them.

In the 1999 elections, these same factors influenced the selection of candidates and voting patterns, and ultimately the balance of power between Muluzi and other potential presidential candidates. However, given that the interplay of these factors does not allow for a one-party ethnic state in Malawi, parties and candidates in the future may engage in more general debate, in the absence of a clear ethnic or religious majority to bring any one party or individual to power.

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[5] Chabal P & J-P Daloz, *Africa Works: Disorder as Political Instrument*. Oxford: James Currey, 1999.

[6] Mamdani M, *op. cit.*; Chabal P & J-P Daloz, *ibid.*

[7] Thorold A, 'Regionalism, tribalism and multiparty democracy: The case of Malawi', *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 7, 2, Winter 2000, pp.135–139.

Lack of participation in rural areas, coupled with the big man syndrome, limits the role that civil society is able to play in Southern Africa. We find in many instances that public and private spheres in Southern Africa are weakly separated, as a result of historical and other factors.[8] Consequently, the actions of civil society are constrained. It is not able to function as an agent of checks and balance; nor is it able to function as a representative mechanism to voice the opinions and needs of the local population. However, the importance of a functional civil society remains. Even when a government formulates well-tested policies, civil society must be involved to help implement those policies successfully and equally.

Southern African democracy and its challenges

The above examples tell us several things about democracy in Southern Africa. First, democracy is new in many of these countries, and still in the process of defining itself. Second, this defining will probably not result in African democracies that mirror those in Western countries, owing to differences in history, politics, economics, and, finally, cultures. Third, local participation may be limited for a variety of reasons, while ethnicity, regionalism and religion have a large role to play in political spheres throughout Southern Africa.

However, it is important to note that in Southern Africa the key to good governance in these societies is not how well democracy measures up to Western democracy.[9] Instead it is how well governments meet the needs of their populations, and to what extent they are able to empower people and civil society to decide their own destinies.

Given the current workings of democracy in Southern Africa, this task is indeed a formidable one. Apart from the limitations described above, increasing poverty in the region constrains both people's ability and their desire to participate in democracy. The combination of droughts and the HIV/AIDS pandemic has worsened the lives of millions of people across the region, and placed democratisation temporarily on the back-burner. The food insecurity in Malawi, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe has resulted in local populations devoting their time to hand-to-mouth survival.

Such extreme situations can paralyse governments at the best of times, and galvanise them into authoritarian action at the worst, especially when neither the rule of law nor an active civil society exist. Such is the

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[8]   Wilson F, Kanji N & E Braathen (eds), *Poverty Reduction: What Role for the State in Today's Globalised Economy?* London: Zed Books, 2001.

[9]   Cheru F, *African Renaissance: Roadmaps to the Challenge of Globalisation.* London: Zed Books, 2002.

case in Zimbabwe, where the breakdown of law and order has shown how easily Southern African regime power structures can be used to entrench a leader. As was stated earlier, Mugabe, supported to a large extent by traditional leaders in what is essentially an ethnic state, is a big man who refuses to give up power. His inability to deal with a failing economy has led him to adopt authoritarian means to stay in power. His political card is land — an issue which all agree should have been dealt with 20 years ago.

The contagion effects of such 'undemocractic' uses of power in the region are still unknown. They serve as a reminder to other countries in Southern Africa of the need for responsible governance. Zimbabwe may not be the only country polarised on issues such as land reform. In Namibia, Botswana and South Africa several groups representing the landless have advocated Zimbabwe-type government interventions to address past injustices. Thus the onus rests on government through good governance to resist populist answers to important issues such as land redistribution, and for them to ensure both that the rule of law is maintained and that the principles enshrined in their respective constitutions are upheld.

Moving ahead: The future role of the state

The challenges the state currently faces in Southern Africa are multiple. The subcontinent is experiencing famine and public health crises. At the same time human development indicators have started to decline. In the midst of these immediate concerns, governments are expected to consolidate democracy while attempting to make economic changes to accommodate globalisation.

Botswana is hailed as the prime example of good governance and democracy in Southern Africa.[10] Its democratic processes are characterised by the participation of both an active civil service and civil society in decision-making. Whereas adult education has empowered civil society, alliances between the working class and petit bourgeoisie have fostered policy debate, and allowed for easier implementation of the government's policies. The population of Botswana consists mainly of one ethnic group. While a thriving diamond and cattle economy contribute to the country's prosperity, civil society has played an active role in supporting the needs of the local populations, even in cases where government policy favoured the interests of the elite.

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[10] Malila IS, 'Starting first and finishing last: Democracy and its discontents in Botswana', *Society in Transition*, 28, 1–4. 1997, pp.20–27.

There is light at the end of the tunnel: Botswana is not the only example of hope in the region. The ending of conflict in Angola and the Democratic Republic of Congo will pave the way for positive developments in all countries in Southern Africa. Changes are imminent in Zimbabwe, as Mugabe struggles to hold on to power amidst criticism from nearly all political spheres, internally as well as externally. Recent history has seen the SWAPO congress recommend that the Namibian constitution should not be changed, despite the urging of traditional leaders. These events are unique to this time period, and may signal that civil society is ready to take action to ensure that governments adopt such policies of economic development and poverty reduction as Nepad recommends. It may also signal that although governments in Southern Africa are not democratic in a Western sense, they are willing to take up the challenges of this new era, adopting more constructive policies. We are likely to find that these policies, if implemented successfully, will reinforce the positive processes of good governance on the subcontinent.