



FADING DEMOCRACIES IN AFRICA

With the end of the cold war east-west rivalry in Africa was replaced by political conditionality leading to a rise of democratic states. This trend is now reversing. This article describes the deteriorating situation in a number of Southern African states and comes to the conclusion that the structural foundations in Africa are not conducive for the development of democratic systems.

FOUNDATION FOR EUROPEAN
PROGRESSIVE STUDIES
FONDATION EUROPÉENNE
D'ÉTUDES PROGRESSISTES



**FEPS
STUDIES**
SEPTEMBER
2017

Arnold Wehmhoerner

FEPS Advisor on Southern Africa

In Western countries we believe that democracy is not perfect but that it is the best form of government we know. After the Brexit vote, Trump's election and the rise of nationalists in Hungary and Poland doubts about the merit of decisions based on democratic procedures are rising. The majority votes for Brexit and Trump and for governments in Hungary and Poland happened despite the fact that these countries have an educated electorate and an advanced infrastructure. What can we expect then from African countries which have neither a wide-ranging educated electorate nor an advanced infrastructure?

The pre-conditions for democracy in the new African states at independence could not have been worse. Firstly, when the colonial powers at the end of the nineteenth century divided Africa they did this with ignorance and no concern for historically developed tribal or ethnic territories. The boundaries were imposed along geometric lines. Therefore, the new nations were not homogeneous and the new elites struggled to create a national identity and still do this today. Secondly, after much hesitation and retaining illusions about the continuation of colonialism by the colonial powers in Africa after World War II the new states finally were rushed into independence. The new elites and administrative infrastructures were ill prepared for such an enormous task. Even well-intentioned leaders often educated in the West failed when faced with the harsh realities of their countries.

After nearly thirty years of independence at the end of the cold war only a few countries in sub-Saharan Africa could be called "electoral democracies". But then the picture changed. In 2007 the number of democracies had increased to 20, accounting for more than a quarter of the region's population¹. Or, to illustrate this development in other terms: Freedom House, America's think tank, for the year 2008 counted 71% of sub-Saharan countries as "free" or "partly free".²

The collapse of the East-West rivalry in Africa cleared the way for donor countries to link development assistance to "political conditionality". Bi-lateral aid came with the pressure to establish open political regimes with competing parties. At the same time World Bank and the IMF would only provide the much needed financial assistance on the basis of market oriented reform agreements.

The positive trend after the end of the cold war indicates that political developments in Africa are obviously linked to global political conditions. Unfortunately this development towards democratisation is now reversing. The latest report of Freedom House comes to the conclusion that only 59% of sub-Saharan countries are now "free" or "partly free", down from 71%³. The political world has become more diverse and complex after the end of the cold war. China has become Africa's biggest trading partner and democratic conditionality is not known to be its trade mark. The fight against jihadists in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa has become for the West more important than the advancement of democratic reforms. Such policies are short-sighted. The best protection against terrorists and extremists are just and prosperous societies. This would also help to stem the tide of desperate refugees seeking to reach the shores of Europe.

Political developments in various African countries illustrate the recent lack of progress in democratisation. On 23rd August 2017 **Angolans** could for the first time in their lives elect a new president. After 38 years as president of Angola the 73 years old José Eduardo dos Santos did not run as the top candidate of the MPLA⁴. What at first sight looks like a democratic achievement in fact will

¹ Rod Alence: *Democracy and Development in Africa* in The Journal of the University of Michigan International Institute, Volume 16, Issue2, Spring 2009

² <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

³ The Economist: *Africa's fragile democracies*, 20.08.2016

⁴ Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola

not bring change. Dos Santos remains president of the MPLA and by decree “locked” his latest appointments which include the heads of the army and the state security forces as well as those of his daughter at the helm of the state oil company Sonangol and his son at the Sovereign Wealth Fund. Dos Santos has also granted himself and his entourage lifelong immunity from prosecution. The chosen successor Joao Lourenco is part of the close entourage of the dos Santos family whose members remain the prime beneficiaries of the misappropriation of public funds.

The MPLA won the elections with 61.7% of the vote, but down from 72% in 2012 and 81% in 2008. In the urban Luanda province the opposition parties nearly reached 50 % of the votes. The opposition claims that the elections were not fair because the MPLA used state machinery and especially the media one sided to their advantage. It is believed that the MPLA would have lost Luanda under fair conditions. The EU had cancelled plans to observe the elections after Luanda did not agree to give its representatives access to all parts of the country.

For a long time **Zambia** has been considered a “partly free”⁵ country with changes of governments through elections. But recent developments are worrying. President Edgar Lungu came to power in 2015 through elections the results of which were hotly contested. On July 5th, 2017 Lungu declared a state of emergency and journalists claim that over 500 members of the opposition party have been detained without charges⁶. He also suspended 48 members of parliament because they boycotted his state of the nation address and he got opposition leader Hakainde Hichilema arrested who was accused of treason because he didn’t make way for the president’s motorcade. South Africa’s opposition leader Mmusi Maimane from the DA⁷ was barred from entering Zambia to attend the treason trial of Hichilema. He believes that Zambia is fast heading towards dictatorship. Maimane urged the attendees of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Summit who met at the end of August in Pretoria to act against Lungu. But SADC kept quiet on the issue as well as the governing party of South Africa, the ANC⁸.

Zimbabwe’s 93 year-old dictator Robert Mugabe still refuses to organise his succession and therewith further prolongs the political and economic agony of this once prosperous country. Succession issues have always been a problem in Africa often leading to civil wars, repetitive coups and economic turmoil. At present two factions within Mugabe’s party ZANU-PF⁹ emerged. One is led by Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa who also chairs the Joint Operation Command. He seems to have an advantage through this position because it is assumed that the prolonged stay in power of Mugabe could only have been possible with the backing of the military. The second group, the “young Turks”, is backed by First Lady Grace Mugabe who is known to have ambitions herself to succeed her husband. It is to be feared that under these conditions a peaceful return to democracy in Zimbabwe will be difficult and take a long time.

Since in 2009 Jacob Zuma became president of **South Africa’s** governing party, the ANC, the country is in a continuous political and economic decline. His and his family’s close relationship to the wealthy Gupta family is the basis for a corrupt patronage network that is dominating party and government. The ANC’s alliance partners, the SA Communist Party and the trade union congress COSATU have both called for his resignation. At a recent no-confidence vote in parliament over 20 members of the ANC voted against him. In December this year the party is electing a new president and a dirty and hard fought succession battle is on the way deeply splitting the once promising

⁵ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

⁶ Shannon Ebrahim: *SA needs to act to reverse Zambia’s sad slide into dictatorship*, Cape Times, 28.07.2017

⁷ Democratic Alliance

⁸ African National Congress

⁹ Zimbabwe African Union – Patriotic Front

liberation party. Even if a Zuma opponent would win he or she will have difficulties to re-establish in time the unity and once high moral standards of the party for the national elections in 2019. South Africa is still a free country with an independent judiciary and media and the next elections will be free and fair but fears are rising that corruption at all levels of government will lead to a further decline of the country.

In the Democratic Republic of **Congo** (DRC) President Joseph Kabila's constitutionally allowed second term ended in December 2016. Since then he has successfully delayed new elections. A fragile consensus was reached with civil society, churches and the main opposition parties to extend his term for one year to give time for the preparation of the elections. But the implementation from Kabila's side is lacking. He told the German magazine *Der Spiegel*: "I promised nothing". The electoral commission said that it will not be possible to have the electoral role ready for elections as planned at the end of this year.

The DRC has 3.7 million internally displaced people of which nearly one million are newly displaced in 2016 making it the highest number in the world for one single country. An additional 1.3 million Congolese have fled the recent violence in the diamond and resource rich Kasai province at the border with Angola. A civil war is raging between government troops, Kabila opponents and war lords. Since last year 80 mass graves have been discovered. Two UN officials who were to investigate were killed in March. The DRC is basically a failed state. Under these circumstances elections are difficult to be held and should not be a priority but rather the establishment of law and order throughout the entire country. The Kabila government failed to do this after having been in power for 16 years. But one cannot see how through elections under these circumstances a new trustworthy government would emerge that could tackle this enormous task.

After the August 8, 2017 elections in **Kenya** the electoral commission (IEBC) declared incumbent president Uhuru Kenyatta the winner with 54% of the votes. The election results were then challenged in court by opposition leader Raila Odinga and the Supreme Court found that the election results are invalid because of mistakes of the IEBC. The elections are to be re-run in 60 days. The full judgement of the court which is necessary to correct the mistakes at the IEBC will only be given in 21 days leaving 39 days for fresh elections: an impossible task. The chairman of the IEBC refused to resign. To have fresh elections under such time pressure and under the same electoral commission will not necessarily give more credibility to the outcome.

However, the court ruling against an incumbent head of state is hailed as a victory for the rule of law. It could influence other nations in Africa and encourage those to seek recourse at courts who suspect that an election was tainted by fraud or other problems.

This narrative could be continued with examples from other countries. If the picture is so depressing, what is the underlining cause for the failure of democracy in Africa? Sceptics believe that the wave of democratisation after the end of the cold war was a "historical accident"¹⁰. Wily rulers responded to an external reform agenda by staging periodic elections to create a façade of democratic legitimacy in order to keep donor funds flowing. But this did not substantially change the lacking structural foundations for democracy in Africa.

Adam Przeworski¹¹ researched the correlation between development and democracy. He found that high GDP would not automatically lead to democracy but once democracy is introduced and the GDP per capita is over 6000 US\$ than democracy would survive but if the GDP per capita is less than 1000

¹⁰ Rod Alence, 2009

¹¹ Adam Przeworski: *Democracy and Development*, Cambridge University Press 2000

US\$ than democracy would almost always fail. Failing democracies in Malawi (322 US\$), Mozambique (378 US\$), Madagascar (405 US\$), DRC (474 US\$), and Zimbabwe (1027 US\$) for example support this thesis, also that the only three “free”¹² countries in Southern Africa have a significant higher GDP per capita: Botswana (7141 US\$), Namibia (5074 US\$), and South Africa (5589 US\$)¹³.

Despite the lack of many essential pre-conditions for democracy like a coherent national identity, the rule of law and a strong and a well performing economy it is surprising that many states in Africa still make progress in democratisation, believes Nic Cheeseman from the University of Birmingham.¹⁴ He also believes that political systems have to be properly designed to minimise risk of disaster. Electoral laws of the winner-takes-all category encourage resistance and conflict from those who have been excluded from access to state resources. Power sharing agreements which could avoid this can bridge difficult situations but once they become permanent will lead to a closed power elite which then is difficult to control and to challenge. Proportional representation through party lists helps to have minority groups represented in parliament but could also lead to complete control of members of parliament by the leadership of the party. Various features of decentralization could help to create meaningful representation in ethnically diverse states and help to counter authoritarian tendencies from the centre.

But political systems do not emerge at the drawing board. They develop over time under the influence of external pressure and internal fights. The outcome is not always the best combination of what could be possible and once in existence is difficult to change. A strong middle class is the best promotor for and controller of democracy. But such a class only emerges in thriving economies which have slowed down considerably in Africa with the end of the commodity boom. Despite China’s growing role in Africa Western influence remains considerable for historic reasons. And if the West fails why should than African democracies flourish under much more difficult conditions?

¹² <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2017>

¹³ GDP per capita figures are from 2016.

¹⁴ Nic Cheeseman in *The State of Democracy in Africa*, Cambridge University Press 2015