



IN SEARCH FOR AN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Rwanda's development success of dictatorial President Kagame is hailed by many observers as a model for Africa. Critics claim that he has sacrificed basic rights like freedom of expression and association. The article examines the success and failures of African as well as Asian ideas for development on the background of dictatorial and democratic forms of government and comes to the conclusion that at the core of the African crisis is the failure of its leaders to provide effective and non-corrupt governments.

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Rwanda is one of the fastest growing economies in Central Africa. Although still poor and mostly agricultural (90% of the population is engaged in subsistence agriculture) the nation has made significant progress in recent years. Indicators point to unbelievable achievements of the country with 11.6 million inhabitants: life expectancy is up to 64.5 years from just 49 years in 2000 and child mortality is down more than two thirds. Visitors are impressed by the immaculate capital Kigali with its well-tended verges, neat houses and quiet roads. This progress was possible just 23 years after the genocide in which more than 800.000 people were killed and which ripped the country apart.

Observers hail the remarkable leadership of President Paul Kagame who has been re-elected in August 2017 for another seven years and who has been honored by the African Union to lead a commission to reform the struggling organization. He is lauded as a visionary leader who keeps his promises and gets things done, someone who curtailed corruption and maintains political stability. Even his critics acknowledge his impressive achievements and he is a very popular and accepted leader.

The darker side of the success story is that Kagame sacrificed basic democratic rights like freedom of expression and freedom of association. Journalists have allegedly been beaten, exiled or killed¹ and members of the opposition disappeared². Human Rights Watch reports that poor and undesirable people are arbitrarily arrested. The governing party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front, controls the country from the centre down to the last village. The memory of the genocide is used to justify limits on freedom of expression; "Rwandans will not tolerate voices that promote a return to the ethnic divisionism that precipitated the genocide 18 years ago. To that extent we place limits on freedom of expression..." so Kagame in 2010³.

African leaders and thinkers are impressed by the developments in Rwanda and believe that finally the continent has an Afrocentric development model which other countries could follow. Development at the expenses of civil rights is for most of them an acceptable trade-off. But the question remains: was this development miracle possible because of its disregard for civil rights, or despite it? Rwanda's dictatorship delivered on its promises but most of the many dictatorships in Africa like for example the one in Zimbabwe didn't. There must be more to successful development than just dictatorial control.

The ongoing debate about Rwanda reminds of similar discussions in Asia in the 70ties, there under the heading "development first and democracy later". In response to continuous critic from the West that Asian governments should allow for more democracy the response was then nearly unison that the populations in Asia are not educated enough to understand the complicated mechanics of a democracy, that the countries are concerned with nation building after having recently been released into independence and that the democratic principle of controversial debate would threaten the just achieved national unity. The countries need to develop first before trying the "luxury" of democracy. At that time Asia was a continent of instability, widespread poverty and corruption competently described in the famous book 'Asian Drama' by Swedish economist and Nobel Prize winner Gunnar Myrdal⁴.

¹ Anjan Sundaram: *Bad News: Last journalists in a Dictatorship*, 2016

² For example Illuminée Iragena of the United Democratic Forces referred to in Simon Allison: *Like it or not, Rwanda is Africa's Future* in Mail and Guardian, 07.07.2017

³ Simon Allison, 2017

⁴ Gunnar Myrdal: *Asian Drama*, 1968

The above arguments were used by Asian leaders to justify some of the most corrupt dictatorships like for example the Ferdinand Marcos regime in the Philippines (1965 to 1986) and the Suharto government in Indonesia (1967 to 1998). An official Philippine commission estimated that the Marcos family had stolen US\$ 5 to 10 billion. After an initial good economic performance Marcos lead the country into a crushing debt crisis. It is estimated that the Suharto family made a fortune of US\$ 73 billion. The country's initial economic success is based on its vast resources of oil, gas, and timber.

What nowadays seems to be Rwanda for Africa was then Singapore for Asia: the role model. Under the tight control of Lee Kwan Yew and the People's Action Party (once a member of the Socialist International) the city state was transformed from a stagnant British crown colony into one of the Asian tigers. Its development model was inclusive, not just for big business and foreign investors but covered every single citizen with public health and housing schemes as well as pensions. The implementation of these policies was possible because Lee Kwan Yew did not look for short-term successes and because he created a very efficient and incorrupt civil service on which he could rely.

Fifty years after the "development first" debate most countries in Asia have gone through rapid industrialization and are doing economically well while political progress has been slow. Indeed with successful development and higher standards of living democratic participatory procedures increased and have become more meaningful in these countries. But Freedom House, the American think tank that rates the democratic status of countries, still counts most Asian countries as only "partly free" like the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and also Singapore. Only South Korea's status was raised to "free"⁵. Obviously such processes take time. The World Bank in its World Development Report 2011 states that it took the 20 best-performing countries (from all over the world) on average 17 years to get the military out of politics, 20 years to achieve a functioning bureaucratic quality and 27 years to bring corruption under reasonable control.⁶

Two countries in Asia are doing economically very well: China after the Cultural Revolution and Vietnam after the war. Both countries are governed by their respective Communist Parties which select and control their leaders. To that extent they are not dictatorships by one individual or family but by parties with ideologies. Despite the original communist dogma which prohibits private ownership both countries encourage private entrepreneurs and rely on market forces for the distribution of goods and services. Powerful state owned enterprises are used to intervene where market forces fail or to achieve social objectives like for example in housing.

China enforced a population growth control policy against believes and deep routed cultural behavior of its citizens. This would not have been possible in a democracy; a point proven by developments in India which is the largest democracy but where birth control methods were rejected by the majority of the population and cannot be enforced by the Indian government. Both countries have a population of about 1.3 billion and India is rapidly overtaking China. India's population growth is offsetting the good progress it is making in many sectors of the economy.

What is Africa supposed to do; can it learn from Asia? In 2018 Freedom House classifies in Sub-Saharan Africa 9 countries as free, 21 as partly free and 14 as not free. The arguments from the debate in Asia in the 1970ties about the structural deficits for the introduction of democratic structures are in Africa even more valid: poverty, lack of an educated electorate, and the challenge of nation building in countries which did not emerge through a historical process but were created by colonial powers at the drawing board at the Berlin Congress in 1878. During the first two decades of

⁵ Freedom House: *Country and Territory Ratings and Statuses* FIW 1973-2018

⁶ World Bank: World Development Report 2011, Overview Page 11

independence there were some forty successful coups and countless attempted coups. Martin Meredith in his classical book 'The State of Africa' writes about the 'Coming of Tyrants' and describes that most African dictators were more interested in enriching themselves than to develop their countries⁷.

Quite a number among the first generation of leaders after independence were competent and dedicated. Educated in the West, left leaning because they admired the rapid industrialization in Russia and the social-democratic social welfare model in Europe they tackled the task of nation building and development with great enthusiasm. But faced with the massive problems of the continent and not being controlled by effective checks and balances most of them developed dictatorial government styles which they tried to justify with ideologies centered on their own persons. In Ghana it was called 'Nkrumahism' after the country's leader into independence, Kwame Nkrumah and Sékou Touré in Guinea called himself 'The Great Son of Africa'. Soon most of the countries became one-party states.

Senegal's founding father Léopold Senghor together with others developed the idea of African socialism which became very popular in post-colonial Africa. But his critics claim that his ideas were too much European centered. More hope was attached to Julius Nyerere's socialist experiment 'Ujamaa' in Tanzania. His modest lifestyle stood out against the extravagancies of other African leaders. Development should start at the lowest rural level where cooperatives work and live for the good of all. He also propagated one-party states and explained that the two-party system had evolved in the West as a result of competition between social-economic classes while African societies are essentially classless. The most recent idea for an African path was the idea of former South African President Thabo Mbeki for an 'African Renaissance'. The recourse to traditional values should help African leaders to find an independent African way towards development.

While Asian dictatorial governments can claim at least that they brought economic progress and prosperity to their populations African dictators with a few exceptions (Botswana under Seretse Khama) have nothing to be proud of. On the contrary, even sixty years after independence are Africa's prospects bleaker than before and the continent is falling further and further behind all other regions in the world. For the fifty years starting in 1960, Sub-Saharan countries as a whole managed to increase their per-capita income by only US\$207 in constant prices (from US\$429 to US\$636)⁸. Africa remains in the grip of political systems characterized by graft and crony capitalism. Asia is certainly not a corruption free continent but foreign investors feel it is 'regulated' in Asia while the scale and predictability of corruption in Africa is uncertain impeding their willingness to invest in Africa.

Up to the financial crisis in 2008 growth rates averaging 5% across the continent fuelled an optimistic view that Africa is rising⁹. The boom was driven by high demands for commodities especially from China. Unfortunately this income from high commodity prices was not used to invest in higher productivity and diversification of the national economies. Instead governments increased state consumption. When the boom was over state budgets were loaded with rising expenditures for the civil service and social welfare leading to growing debts. African elites missed a chance to lift their countries on to a higher level of industrialization. They were not able to overcome the colonial legacy

⁷ Martin Meredith: *The State of Africa*, 2005

⁸ Greg Mills & Jeffrey Herbst: *Africa's third liberation*, 2012, page 31

⁹ Mills Soko: *Development in Africa is on a firm footing – here's how to take it to the next level*, SAST, 21.12.2016

of being dependent on the oil and commodity price cycle dominated by Western and now also by rising Asian economies.

But it is not entirely their fault. During the last decades the ideology of free trade and free markets was dominant requiring countries to gain access to the global economy through liberalization, privatization and deregulation in order to compete with other countries under equal conditions. This limits the ability of countries to develop long-term economic strategies for national diversification. African countries were forced to ignore the lessons rich countries made on their way to industrialization namely to protect their own industries until they were ready to compete on the world market. By submitting to the rules of the World Trade Organization African countries abandoned their rights for a protected industrial policy. Now, after the realization that the 'rise of Africa' is a myth African leaders have to re-position their development plans.¹⁰ By doing so they must not shy away from confronting Western governments which are not inclined to change their trade and agricultural policies for the sake of Africa's revival. The total of their agricultural subsidies is higher than the gross domestic product for the whole of Sub-Saharan Africa.¹¹

The crux with propagated model countries is that that they usually wouldn't work elsewhere. Nic Cheeseman from the University of Birmingham believes that Rwanda's model cannot be copied because the "political dominance and tight centralized control of patronage networks do not apply" in other countries. He argues that opposition parties in other countries like for example in Kenya or Zimbabwe are too strong and that efforts to neutralize them would lead to political instability. Extending the control of the ruling party in such countries would likely increase graft and waste. In contrary to that and that is special to Rwanda, the economic and political dominance of the "Rwandan Patriotic Front has not undermined development because funds generated through party-owned enterprises have often been reinvested in the economy".¹²

It was obvious that because of Singapore's unique geographical situation its development model would not work elsewhere in the same way. Singapore is located at the crossroad of the most important global shipping routes and was predestined to become an international trading centre. The city state does not have a rural hinterland and could control the influx of unskilled labour (from Malaysia and Indonesia) at will. It is not burdened with the major problem of urban centres in Africa, the uncontrolled inflow of rural people into the ever growing townships and slums.

Whatever the system, dictatorial or democratic, important are visionary and incorruptible strategic leaders who institute good governance and secure that those high principles are maintained into the next generation of leaders. Nelson Mandela in democratic South Africa was such a leader of high moral values but his standards could not be maintained. One of his successors, Jacob Zuma, led the country into an unbelievable fast downward spiral of corruption and incompetence not having been imaginable when the country got rid of apartheid in 1994.

Lee Kwan Yew in Singapore was able to secure his legacy of good governance beyond his retirement and death. What the situation will be in Rwanda after Kagame needs to be seen. The succession question is one of the main problems of nations led by dictators even if they are of a benevolent character: what is going to happen after their retirement or death.

¹⁰ Rick Rowden: *Das Ende des Mythos – Afrika hat sich nie wirklich entwickelt*, Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft, www.ipg-journal.de, 01.02.2016

¹¹ Martin Meredith 2005, page 684

¹² Nic Cheesemann: *Why Rwanda's development model wouldn't work elsewhere in Africa* in The Conversation. 08.01.2018

A political system with embedded principles of justice, social responsibility and equality that is self-correcting and has checks and balances in place is to be preferred to the good intentions of an authoritative leader who may die any time. The democratic model with its separation of powers and change of leadership through elections is such a system that maintains standards over time and is self-correcting.

But, democracy is only working well in countries with high standards of living and education and not in countries with high levels of poverty and in which individuals have to rely for their survival and that of their families on the assistance of their kin, tribes or political acquaintances. Whatever the constitution in such countries says about individual freedom it has no meaning for the jobless who must aim to become part of a patronage network that would support them. To that extent the discourse on “development first” cannot just be brushed away with western arrogance by people living in affluent democracies when authoritative states provide development and are able to create more jobs. The tragedy of Africa is that their dictatorial leaders with a few exceptions have just not done this. Not economic development failed in Africa, at the “core of its crisis is the failure of its leaders to provide effective governments”¹³. The search for an African development model needs to be continued and has to begin with visionary and incorruptible leaders who are able to create and keep an efficient administration.

¹³ Martin Meredith 2005, page 686