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RCDS 2008 – CONTEMPORARY STRATEGIC ISSUES

What Does The History Of Recent Elections In Ethiopia And Kenya Tell Us About The Nature Of Politics In Africa And The Prospects For Peaceful Transfers Of Power Between Political Parties That May Be More Or Less Based On Ethnic Groups?

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Key Judgements

- Democratic tradition and practice continue to be immature, with political power often based on personality, ethnicity, and neo-patrimonial relationships rather than the idea of nationhood, separation of powers, the rule of law, and human rights
- Political change in Africa has often been achieved as a result of violent upheaval and leaders often find it difficult to relinquish power and as a consequence most nascent democracies do not enjoy a history of peaceful transfers of power between political parties
- At the same time, many African nations have not established a strong civil society that provides for a robust framework of checks and balances, and avoids the ‘winner takes all’ phenomena
- Nevertheless, there are some emerging signs that African politics is changing, and that political liberalisation in time may result in more peaceful transfers of power

Discussion

Democratic Facade

Although most African countries have written Constitutions, the ruling parties have not always respected the constitutional arrangements, and the legal system has not been strong enough to enforce democracy and respect for human rights. In Ethiopia, for example, the 2005 elections were found by an EU Observer Mission to “fall short of international principles for genuine democratic elections”. The regime responded to opposition success in a heavy-handed fashion, detaining the entire Coalition for Unity and Democracy leadership. The more independent-minded judges have been replaced, and the National Electoral Board Commissioners are appointed by – and sympathetic to – the ruling party. In Kenya, the 1963 Constitution has been amended frequently, mostly increasing the powers of the President. A referendum in 2005 did defeat a proposal to increase them further, but the Constitutional debate remains at the very forefront of political debate. A similar account applies across the Continent, where the rule of law and principle of the separation of powers is widely ignored. At the same time, many African states lack a credible election infrastructure to ensure free and fair elections, as vividly illustrated by the Kreigler Report concerning the 2007 Kenya elections. Election officials depend upon a particular party to remain in their job. Courts are unwilling or unable to act. As a result, in many African countries corruption has become almost the norm, and for politicians the retention of power is a means of obtaining extreme wealth. And throughout, the media (frequently either owned or controlled by the ruling party) is prevented from presenting a critical view.

Personality Politics

Strong personalities dominate African politics. This is true not just in Ethiopia (Mengistu, Meles) and Kenya (Kenyatta, Moi) but elsewhere (e.g. Mandela, Kagame, Mugabe, Kabila, Museveni). Political parties tend to be a platform for a single individual (or revolutionary cause) whose personality is the driving force. In Kenya, the number of new political parties is evidence of a lack of durability of any particular party. Similarly, in Ethiopia, the opposition parties change and re-form in the absence of an ability to coalesce around a powerful opposition figure. Political parties do not show great philosophical consistency, but instead their life expectancy is tied to the fate of their leaders. And yet these leaders often appear reluctant to relinquish power or identify and nurture a younger successor. The result is a political vacuum when they do go, and a violent struggle to fill the space thereafter.

Ethnic Self-Interest

The political environment in Ethiopia and Kenya suggest that political activity is not determined so much by a political ideology but rather loyalty to an ethnic group. In Ethiopia, the Shoan Amharic hegemony lay at the core of earlier regimes. The current ruling party has its roots in a Tigrayan national movement, and the country's boundaries are defined by ethnicity – to the extent that Eritrea won independence from Ethiopia in 1993. Today, Oromo and Somali groups are largely excluded from government. In Kenya, the civil violence following the 2007 election was essentially tribal. Where power is exercised on ethnic lines, those not in power rarely feel included, and this winner takes all situation almost inevitably leads to violent transfers of power.

Some Exceptions

In 1977, a Freedom House survey listed just 3 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa (7%). In 2007, the number had risen to 11 (23%). However, the period includes the wave of democratisation that swept the Continent following the end of the Cold War. Leadership is important. But prosperity and stability are key too. Those countries – like Mauritius and South Africa – who are relatively wealthy and who enjoy regional stability have demonstrated that it is possible for democratic traditions to survive – but even in these cases there has not been routine transfers of power from one political party to another.

Conclusion

Recent elections in Ethiopia and Kenya would suggest that incumbent African leaders still have difficulty accepting the basic premise of democracy – the right of people to choose their leaders through free and fair elections. Loss of political power is seen to represent a loss of economic advantage, wealth creation, and ethnic grouping dominance.

The conduct of elections will continue to be the primary measure of democratic practice in Africa, as in elsewhere, by the international community. Given the immaturity of institutional checks and balances, incumbent governments and political spoilers will continue to suborn the process, whilst using the language of legitimacy.

Despite the often gloomy picture portrayed about democracy trends in Africa, there is a trajectory which suggests that greater representation of electorates, more political

accountability, and better governance will become more regular features of the political landscape.

Nevertheless, violent upheaval, election rigging, politics conducted along ethnic lines, entrenchment of political elites and corrupt political practices will remain features of the same landscape for the immediate future. Reform and change will only come about from the growth of indigenous experience.

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