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## ***Democracy and Africa – a View from the Village***

by MAXWELL OWUSU\*

The fact that this new nation has succeeded in fostering economic growth and democracy under the aegis of equalitarian values holds out hope for the rest of the world. For prosperity, freedom, and equality cannot be for white men only. If they are, then they will prove to have been as illusory and impermanent as the slave-based democracies of ancient Greece.

– Seymour Martin Lipset, *The First New Nation: the United States in historical and comparative perspective* (Garden City, NY, 1967), p. 395.

OVER 20 years ago I tried to explain what it was in ex-colonial West African societies that produced political instability and supported authoritarian and military order, and what had to happen to make liberal democracy possible.<sup>1</sup> It is important to recall that the 1960s were very exciting and turbulent years in post-war sub-Saharan Africa because no less than 31 territories became sovereign states. But it was also an era of civil unrest that included *coups d'état*, the overthrow of western-style democratic institutions, the rise of one-party (legal or dominant) states, and military rule. The most tragic upheaval was, of course, the civil war in Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria.

But even as the decade drew to a close there were clear indications that several African countries were likely to return either completely or partly to the West's type of democracy. Ghana introduced multi-party government in 1969 after a military coup had overthrown Nkrumah's Marxist–Leninist régime in 1966,<sup>2</sup> and Nigeria reverted to civilian rule in 1976 after a fratricidal civil war. However much freedom-lovers everywhere might encourage and welcome such moves, 'the democracy

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<sup>1</sup> Maxwell Owusu, 'Culture and Democracy in West Africa: some persistent problems', in *Africa Today* (Denver), 18, 1, January 1971, pp. 68–76.

<sup>2</sup> See Maxwell Owusu, *Uses and Abuses of Political Power: a case study of continuity and change in the politics of Ghana* (Chicago and London, 1970).

of the franchise', as I had observed earlier, 'could hardly, in itself, ensure peaceful and stable government. Good leadership is not necessarily assured by the free ballot; nor does civilian rule invariably produce social and economic democracy'.<sup>3</sup>



We need to recognise the existence of two related but often confused sets of problems. First, there are the practical issues which arise from the efforts made to impose foreign political models on societies with a different history and unique combination of indigenous traditions, economic conditions, and external constraints. Secondly, there are theoretical questions, such as those implied in the pluralist democratic theory dominant in American social science, which relate to the methods, aims, and processes of liberalisation and democratisation in third-world countries, the focus of much debate since the 1950s.<sup>4</sup>

Both types of problems clearly ought to be carefully analysed in any planned democratisation in Africa. There are obvious dangers in the sweeping and indiscriminate application of theoretical models and procedures to a particular case-study, as there are bound to be setbacks in any attempt to democratise a country without paying serious attention to its history, traditions, culture and symbolic meanings, and economic circumstances. Complicating the obviously difficult process of transition, and often not fully appreciated or adequately recognised, is the endemic 'feud mentality' produced and perpetuated by coups and counter-coups or civil wars. The ensuing recriminatory and vendetta politics undermines consensus-building, as well as the development of traditions of compromise required for sustainable democracies.

The highly charged political climate of most transitions to democracy is as much a product of this 'feud mentality' and vengeance politics as of the fact that the amending or making of any constitution inevitably involves attempts by opposing and dominant interests, groups, and

<sup>3</sup> Owusu, 'Culture and Democracy in West Africa', p. 68.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Dennis C. Mueller, *The Political Economy of Growth* (New Haven, CT, 1983); Myron Weiner and Samuel P. Huntington (eds.), *Understanding Political Development* (Boston, 1987); and Robert A. Dahl, *Democracy and Its Critics* (New Haven, CT, 1989). Also, Naomi Chazan, 'Planning Democracy in Africa: a comparative perspective on Nigeria and Ghana', in *Policy Sciences* (Amsterdam), 22, 1989, pp. 325-57.

individuals to legitimise their position.<sup>5</sup> Thus Ralf Dahrendorf's distinction between 'constitutional' and 'normal' politics can hardly be sustained in practice.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, it can be reasonably argued that the controversial transitional provisions in Ghana's new constitution, which indemnify members and appointees of the Provisional National Defence Council (P.N.D.C.) jointly and severally from liability for any official act or omission during the latter's administration, is a sensible effort to prevent the real possibility of the politics of vengeance after the inauguration of the Fourth Republic in January 1993.<sup>7</sup> What the country urgently needs is a stable political environment to evolve and peacefully nurture the politics of consensus and reconciliation consistent with Ghana's communal values for human development.

#### THE LEGACY OF THE PAST

After an unhappy survey of the tragic history of liberal democracy in post-colonial Africa, Benjamin Barber and Patrick Watson asked: 'If Western democracy...ended up looking like a sad cross between paternalism and corruption, what are the alternatives? What might an indigenous African form of democracy look like?' The answer, according to them, has to be sought in the ideas and forms of equality and participation found in the village council and similar institutions of community governance. Thus a 'greater reliance on modern variations of these forms might succeed where Western forms of democracy had failed'.<sup>8</sup>

The nature of the relationship between indigenous African political traditions and western democratic institutions is certainly critical to any intelligent and realistic assessment of the prospect of sustainable democratisation. We need to find practical answers to at least two urgent questions: (1) Can African states at their present levels of socio-economic development and widespread poverty support a viable western-style multi-party democracy that will also lead to cumulative improvements in living standards for a broad majority of their populations? (2) Can African states support financially, as well as emotionally and ideologically, the establishment of multi-party

<sup>5</sup> See Maxwell Owusu, 'Constitutional Change: a dual executive?', in *West Africa* (London), 14–20 October, 1991, p. 1722.

<sup>6</sup> See Ralf Dahrendorf, *Reflections on the Revolution in Europe* (New York, 1990), pp. 34–7.

<sup>7</sup> See *West Africa*, 6–12 April 1992, p. 586, and 18–24 May 1992, p. 869, for public reactions to the P.N.D.C.'s transitional provisions.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Barber and Patrick Watson, *The Struggle for Democracy* (Boston, 1988), p. 85.

democracies that will also produce prosperity, freedom, and social justice for all? In other words, are they ready for *capitalist* democracy?<sup>9</sup> Ralph Miliband claims that this 'is a contradiction in terms, for it encapsulates two opposed systems':

On the one hand there is capitalism, a system of economic organization that demands the existence of a relatively small class of people who own and control the main means of industrial, commercial, and financial activity, as well as a major part of the means of communication; these people thereby exercise a totally disproportionate amount of influence on politics and society both in their own countries and in lands far beyond their own borders. On the other hand there is democracy, which is based on the *denial* of such preponderance, and which requires a rough *equality of condition* that capitalism...repudiates by its very nature.<sup>10</sup>

A key argument of this article is that though western values, attitudes, and institutions have had a profound effect on national politics in post-colonial Africa, 'they have not been strong enough to create lasting institutional and attitudinal basis for [democratic] political development', as pointed out in 1978 by A. L. Adu.<sup>11</sup> What this means, in part, is that no account of the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule can be satisfactory if it ignores the pervasive influence of the total cultural setting, including the impact of colonialism, because they both condition the form and content of contemporary politics in Africa. Ivor Jennings stated as long ago as 1963 that 'African democracy should be the same as other democracies', and then went on to claim that although this was impossible, 'because other democracies are founded each on its own *tradition*, ...at least the form can be the same, i.e., one citizen, one vote'.<sup>12</sup> We now know, however, that free and fair elections must be linked with reasonable economic security for every citizen.

<sup>9</sup> See Dennis Smith, *Capitalist Democracy on Trial: the transatlantic debate from Tocqueville to the present* (London, 1990), for the identification and critical discussion of ten types of 'capitalist democracy' and the challenges that each poses. Also, Bjorn Beckman, 'Whose Democracy? Bourgeois versus Popular Democracy', in *Review of African Political Economy* (Sheffield), 45-46, 1989, pp. 84-97.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Miliband, 'Fukuyama and the Socialist Alternative', in *New Left Review* (London), 193, May-June 1992, p. 109.

<sup>11</sup> A. L. Adu, 'The Administrator and Change', in James Ntũ (ed.), *The Task of the Administrator in the Developing Societies of Africa. Report of the Sixth Inter-African Public Administration Seminar* (Tema, 1978), p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> W. Ivor Jennings, *Democracy in Africa* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 67, my emphasis.

*The Purposes of Empire*

I believe that the root causes of Africa's economic and political problems can be found in two related factors: (1) the colonial legacy – what Margery Perham described as the purposes of empire;<sup>13</sup> and (2) the political culture of corrupt and autocratic leadership in most post-colonial countries in Africa,<sup>14</sup> whether governed by multi-party, one-party, or military régimes.

The issue of empire is of direct relevance to the contemporary situation. It is naïve to insist, as some observers do, that Africans have no business blaming colonialism for their present socio-economic and political ills after more than a generation of independence. The term 'empire' has been applied by Roger Scruton to states characterised, among other things, 'by a theory of potentially universal jurisdiction sanctioned by a religion, law or ideology that transcends national boundaries', the main feature being the disregard or disrespect for 'the sovereignty of weaker powers usually accompanied by a belief in the innate superiority of either the race, or history, or the institutions of a governing people'.<sup>15</sup> Obviously, the current plurality of divided, weak, and mostly poor states within the new 'empire' of the global political economy has a bearing on the dynamics of African life and struggles for democracy.

We may recall in this connection the U.S. Administration's frankness about the geo-political interests and commitments of the two competing superpowers. Ronald Reagan divided the world into the Empire of Ideals, of western style democracy, and the Evil Empire, of communism<sup>16</sup> – that is, before Michail Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost* set in motion a wave of liberalisation and democratisation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The five purposes of empire identified by Perham, the colonial historian – namely, economic, security, emigration, power and prestige, and philanthropy – apply, albeit modified slightly, with equal force to the post cold-war situation. Of course, such an analysis is difficult, because as Perham explained, 'To attempt to judge an empire would be rather like approaching an elephant with a tape-measure: the size and shape of the object baffles us; and being alive, it will not keep still'.<sup>17</sup> And some changes may be

<sup>13</sup> Margery Perham, *The Colonial Reckoning* (New York, 1962).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Victor T. LeVine, *Political Corruption: the Ghana case* (Stanford, 1974).

<sup>15</sup> Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (New York, 1982), p. 145.

<sup>16</sup> Ronald Reagan, 'Communist Dominoes are Falling', in *The Wall Street Journal* (New York), 24 May 1990, p. A14.

<sup>17</sup> Perham, *op. cit.* pp. 125–6.

more apparent than real, for as Thomas Friedman had recently reminded us, 'Although Russia is no longer an ideological enemy of the United States it is still a great power, and great powers don't just bid farewell to their past and willingly accept a diminished role'.<sup>18</sup>

The economic purpose of empire is mainly the expansion of trade and commerce, or capitalism, and in the process Africa has become even more underdeveloped. The continent, as is well known, became a source of cheap labour, going back to the slave trade, as well as many kinds of raw materials. Since the colonies also provided markets for excess European manufacturers, everything was done to prevent colonies from developing industries whose products could compete with those of the 'mother' country.

European rivalries led to the so-called 'scramble' for Africa in the late nineteenth century. Colonial boundaries were arbitrarily drawn, often splitting up communities, families, ethnic groups, and cultural units, thereby either destroying or undermining many indigenous structures and institutions of authority. Ethnic populations that were traditional enemies, in some cases found themselves within the same artificial boundaries. Hardly any efforts were made by the colonial masters to promote inter-ethnic/cultural tolerance and understanding within the new states. Indeed, the 'divide-and-rule' strategy adopted everywhere by European administrators tended to exacerbate ethnic tensions and to fuel separatist movements. One may note here the disastrous implications of international boundaries in Africa for the development of democratic states and of coherent, viable, and integrated economies.

As for the security purpose of any empire, continuing attempts will be made to protect and promote its share of global commerce and trade, as well as its mercantilist ideas and hegemonic capitalism. With reference to the security needs of the British Empire, Lord Salisbury once said that he feared 'the military would advise him to garrison the moon to protect us from Mars'<sup>19</sup> – not quite such an outlandish witticism in our age of Star wars and Scud missiles as it was in the nineteenth century. There can be little doubt that emigration provides another important purpose. It should be enough to mention the white settlers, and the oppressive, exploitative, and racist political institutions that they managed to impose on Africans in several regions of the continent, and the bloody wars of liberation that their presence

<sup>18</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, 'The Odd Art of Summitry Without a Cold War', in *The New York Times*, 14 June 1992, p. 4E.

<sup>19</sup> Perham, *op. cit.* pp. 126–7.

occasioned. The first three aims – economic, security, and emigration – were embodied, according to Perham, in the fourth, the attainment and enjoyment of national power and prestige. The fifth and final purpose of empire is the challenging ideals of philanthropy, of humanitarian concerns, which ‘alone saw the interests of the ruled as equal, if not indeed superior, to those of the rulers’.<sup>20</sup>

When Africans attack imperialism in the colonial as well as post-colonial periods, apologists of foreign economic and political domination are quick to point to such achievements as the establishment of schools, the spread of Christianity, the ideals of democracy and individualism, and the introduction of western science and technology, and especially modern medicines, which accompanied the other less virtuous manifestations of empire. But these advances were (and still are) mainly the result of the unequal economic and political relationship between Africa and the western world, which tends to reinforce the effective realisation of the purposes of empire as enumerated above, and to perpetuate the marginalisation and underdevelopment of Africa. As Frederick Lugard, one of the most famous British colonial administrators, candidly admitted: ‘European brains, capital, and energy have not been and never will be, expended in developing the resources of Africa from motives of pure philanthropy’.<sup>21</sup>

The culture of corrupt and autocratic political leadership is the second principal factor which has contributed to the present economic and political violence and repression, mounting international debt, and famine. As many as 35 of the 36 poorest countries in the world are to be found in Africa,<sup>22</sup> linked in part to its colonial heritage and the peculiarities of its nationalism. Colonial education created a small African political class, an élite with oligarchic or authoritarian tendencies, which preferred to perpetuate its own ascendancy and privileged status after independence rather than to share power with other groups in African society.

For example, in pre-independence Ghana, considered the model colony by several British administrators, it has been estimated that ‘fewer than a thousand’ persons made up the nationalist leadership. At

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p. 127.

<sup>21</sup> Sir Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (Edinburgh, 1929 edn.), p. 617.

<sup>22</sup> Morris Szeftel, ‘Warlords and Problems of Democracy in Africa’, in *Review of African Political Economy*, 45–46, 1989, p. 7. According to *UNDP Human Development Report, 1990* (New York, 1990), p. 128, of the 44 countries in the world with ‘low’ human development, 33 are in Africa.



the beginning of the 1950s there were only 32 journalists, 38 doctors, 114 lawyers, and 435 clergymen out of a total population of 4.5 million in the then Gold Coast. In comparative terms, the African élite was even smaller in most other colonies. During the same period, for instance, Nigeria with a much larger population of 40 million had only 150 lawyers, 160 doctors, and 786 clergymen. Higher education, including the high-status jobs it brought, remained the privilege of the few well into the first decade of the post-colonial era.<sup>23</sup>

#### TWO CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRACY

After a full generation of independence, literacy rates in Africa as a whole are still very low compared to Latin America, the Caribbean, and the newly industrialising countries of Asia. In Ghana only 54 per cent of the adult population was reported to be literate in 1985.<sup>24</sup> In general, the position is somewhat better in the ex-British colonies of East and Central Africa than those of West Africa, and not as bad as in the territories that belonged to the Portuguese and the French, with some exceptions (for example, Gabon with 65 per cent). Most of the inhabitants of sub-Saharan Africa still have little or no formal education, and they live predominantly in dispersed or clustered rural villages that have only slight and/or intermittent contacts with local, regional, and especially national political structures. Clearly, it is in the countryside, not the towns and cities, where the new institutions and structures of democracy adapted to local traditions should take root and radiate to regional and national political centres.

Basil Davidson has argued that political instability and poverty in post-colonial Africa are basically the result of contradictions between two sets of opposed concepts of community, and the historical struggle since the 1850s to find a workable synthesis. According to Davidson, the African model rested on the assertion of an all-embracing community, whatever the characteristic forms of internal inequalities which certainly existed within it, whereas the European model 'necessarily rests, on the advancement of the few at the expense of the many as a basic and unavoidable *principle* of capitalist formation'.<sup>25</sup> In other words, the former placed primary emphasis on corporate group needs and loyalty, while the latter puts great stress on 'individual' interests and values.

<sup>23</sup> See T. E. Vadney, *The World Since 1945* (Harmondsworth, 1987), pp. 234–5.

<sup>24</sup> *UNDP Human Development Report, 1990*, p. 134.

<sup>25</sup> Basil Davidson, 'Questions about Nationalism', in *African Affairs* (London), 76, 302, January 1977, p. 44.

Thus, in many areas of Africa, the authority of the village, town, or ethnic group – frequently symbolised by institutions of chieftaincy – may well be far more significant and influential than the ‘far away’ national or regional government with little or no roots in the community. The enduring bonds of kinship, language, and locality provide the immediate context within which the dynamics of ‘civil ties’ – the three elements identified by T. H. Marshall which govern relationships among citizens, namely civil, political, and social rights<sup>26</sup> – and ‘civil authorities’ are negotiated and meaningfully developed, for the exercise of ‘civil democracy’.<sup>27</sup> It is against this background, for instance, that the on-going Ethiopian struggle for democracy based on the concept of ‘ethnic federalism’ must be understood.<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, that essential element of the western democratic model, the competitive party system, has proved in practice to be primarily a mechanism of élite competition, recruitment, circulation, and control in both the Westminster parliamentary and U.S. presidential style of government. Writing in 1965 about politics in West Africa, Arthur Lewis claimed that

what is wrong with the parties in new states is not that they exist, but that their inheritance from European political philosophy is the language and tactics of the class war, rather than language and tactics of groups whose problem is to live in a coalition with each other.<sup>29</sup>

This comment suggests that there are other equally viable alternatives. In fact, as shown convincingly by Arend Lijphart, the consensus model of democracy aims at restraining majority rule

by requiring or encouraging: the *sharing of power* between the majority and minority (grand coalitions), the *dispersal of power* (among executive and legislature, two legislative chambers, and several minority parties), a *fair distribution of power* (proportional representation), the *delegation of power* (to territorially or nonterritorially organized groups), and a *formal limit on power* (by means of the minority veto).<sup>30</sup>

This may be the most suitable form of democracy not only for small countries in the Eastern Caribbean, like Grenada,<sup>31</sup> but also, I would suggest, for many in Africa.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>26</sup> T. H. Marshall, *Class, Citizenship and Social Development* (Garden City, NY, 1965).

<sup>27</sup> Marta Fuentes and A. G. Frank, ‘Ten Theses on Social Movements’, in *World Development* (Oxford), February 1989, pp. 179–92.

<sup>28</sup> See Andrew Lycett, ‘Ethiopia Power Struggle’, in *New African* (London), April 1992, p. 39.

<sup>29</sup> W. Arthur Lewis, *Politics in West Africa* (London, 1965), p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Arend Lijphart, *Democracies. Patterns of Majoritarian and Consensus Government in Twenty-one Countries* (New Haven, 1984), p. 30.

<sup>31</sup> Arend Lijphart, ‘Size, Pluralism and the Westminster Model of Democracy: implications for the Eastern Caribbean’, in Jorge Heine (ed.), *A Revolution Aborted: the lessons of Grenada* (Pittsburgh, 1990), pp. 321–40.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Arend Lijphart (ed.), *Parliamentary Versus Presidential Government* (Oxford, 1992).

Indeed, the evolving democratic reforms set in motion by the P.N.D.C. since the so-called '31st December [1981] Revolution' – in spite of earlier very serious structural and policy mistakes, publicly acknowledged by the Head of State, associated with the extreme 'leftist' tendency at the time – obviously envisage changes influenced by the consensus model. Clear evidence for this can be found in several measures implemented by the Government since 1984, notably: the reconstitution of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (C.D.R.s), formerly the disliked People's Defence Committees (P.D.C.s); the creation of decentralised District Assemblies, including their membership, powers, and modalities for elections; and the establishment of the National Consultative Assembly (N.C.A.), whose 258 members included representatives of such 'non-élite' organisations as the Butcher's Association, the Canoe Fisherman's Association, the Ghana Hairdressers' Association, the Market Women's Association, the C.D.R.s, and the District Assemblies.<sup>33</sup> They discussed the draft proposals, submitted by the Constitutional Experts Committee, which had been

conceived within the framework of using the constitution, among other functions, as an instrument for promoting national development, for building a tradition of power-sharing and national consensus in which values of accountability and probity, and fidelity to overall public interest are paramount.<sup>34</sup>

They were also meant to nurture respect for the rule of law and for human rights, notably the rights of women and children and other vulnerable or disadvantaged groups.<sup>35</sup>

The solution to the problem of democracy advocated by Davidson, and shared by the writer,<sup>36</sup> lies in the discovery and the forging of a new viable political synthesis which derives 'firmly from the African past, yet fully accepts the challenges of the African present'. More importantly, what is needed is a synthesis that would close the communication gap between the educated few – the culturally westernised and 'alienated élites', for whom the model of the bourgeois nation-state inherited from colonial rule has 'acquired the status of manifest destiny' – and the mostly illiterate rural and rapidly growing

<sup>33</sup> See *The Ghanaian Times* (Accra), 26 August 1991, for a complete list of N.C.A. members.

<sup>34</sup> Owusu, 'Constitutional Choices', p. 1722.

<sup>35</sup> See Republic of Ghana, *Report of the Committee of Experts (Constitution) on Proposals for a Draft Constitution of Ghana Presented to the PNDC July 31, 1991* (Tema, 1991). The author acted as consultant to the nine-member Committee chaired by Dr S. K. B. Asante.

<sup>36</sup> Maxwell Owusu, 'Politics Without Parties: reflection on the Union Government proposals in Ghana', in *African Studies Review* (Los Angeles), 22, 1, 1979, pp. 89–108.

urban masses 'for whom the new nation-state, so long as this gap exists, can only be an enemy'.<sup>37</sup>

The importance of such a synthesis was recognised more than half a century ago by J. E. Casely Hayford, a founding member of the National Congress of British West Africa. In a speech in London in 1920, at a meeting between the League of Nations Union and the visiting delegates of the National Congress, this early Ghana nationalist leader pointed out that

though we here happen to be dressed in your way, and happen to speak your language, it is not true or accurate to say that we are divorced from the institutions and customs of our people... And our system being a communal one, it is a case of sink or swim with the family and the community... in our system no individuals can come to the top and try to get political power into their hands with the object of exploiting the masses. We cannot do that in our system; educated or uneducated, we sink or swim with our people.<sup>38</sup>

Yet, nearly everywhere in Africa, exploitation of the masses by the better organised and more powerful middle-class men, civilian and military, has been the common experience. They have monopolised the state and used the administrative machinery of centralised bureaucracy against the legitimate needs and wishes of local communities and populations, bringing them hardship and untold suffering, not liberty. The objective of empire, as numerated above, have tended to encourage authoritarianism, paternalism, and corrupt rule in Africa, as the experience of Zaïre under Mobutu Sese Seke has perhaps most clearly demonstrated.<sup>39</sup>

#### DECENTRALISATION, DEMOGRAPHY, AND DEMOCRACY

It has been argued that any serious attempt to create new viable political and economic institutions, which are truly progressive and democratic, must involve empowering the rural and urban masses.<sup>40</sup> Decentralisation is widely held to be an antidote to the concentration and corruption of power, and as a means of strengthening the intermediate voluntaristic institutions of civil society, and of ensuring

<sup>37</sup> Davidson, 'Questions about Nationalism', p. 44.

<sup>38</sup> Magnus J. Sampson, *West African Leadership. Public speeches delivered by J. E. Casely Hayford* (Ilfracombe, 1951, reprinted London, 1969), pp. 41-2. See also, David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana*, Vol. 1, *The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism, 1850-1928* (Oxford, 1963), chs. II and XIII.

<sup>39</sup> See Crawford Young and Thomas Turner, *The Rise and Decline of the Zaïrian State* (Madison, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> Basil Davidson, 'Nationalism Reconsidered', in *UCLA African Studies Center Newsletter* (Los Angeles), Spring 1988, pp. 10-12.

that the basic needs and expectations of local communities and citizenry are respected. Popular, participatory democracy based on African concepts of community appears to be an essential element in any meaningful answer to endemic political and economic troubles.

It goes without saying that imported constitutional models, whether U.K. parliamentary, U.S. presidential, or Marxist–Leninist, have so far not worked in Africa. Past claims by incumbent political leaders that the one-party state they introduced is consistent with African political traditions have been shown to be fraudulent, as well as an obstacle to serious consideration of viable democratic alternatives rooted in local cultures. Samuel Huntington has argued that an important criterion for measuring the consolidation or successful institutionalisation of democracy is the ‘two turnover test’:

a democracy may be viewed as consolidated if the party or group that takes power in the initial election at the time of transition [from authoritarian or military rule to democracy] loses a subsequent election and turns over power to those election winners, and if [they] then peacefully turn over power to the winners of a later election.<sup>41</sup>

Within the last generation of independence, no less than 70 leaders throughout sub-Saharan Africa have been overthrown by the armed forces. Of the region’s 47 states, only five – Botswana, Djibouti, The Gambia, Mauritius, and Senegal – have maintained nominal multi-party parliamentary systems, with regular, more-or-less free elections that, it must be stressed, tended to confirm the incumbents in power and to produce, in effect, electoral oligarchies.<sup>42</sup>

Colin Legum has argued that these five examples suggest that ‘Even in societies as culturally cleaved as Mauritius and Djibouti, [such political systems] perform at least as well as, if not better than, most single-party states’.<sup>43</sup> All the same, the countries share certain attributes that tend to contribute to the establishment and consolidation of democracy. For example, although Djibouti, with a population of only 394,000, about half of which lives in the capital city, may be dominated by two major ethnic groups, they are united by one religion, *Sunni* Muslim, and a common language. Mauritius, with its 1.6 million largely Indo-Mauritian and Creole population, is more comparable to

<sup>41</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: democratization in the late twentieth century* (Norman, OK, 1991), pp. 226–7.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Robert Michels, *First Lectures in Public Sociology*, translated by Alfred de Grazia (Minneapolis, 1949), pp. 134–54.

<sup>43</sup> Colin Legum, ‘The Coming of Africa’s Second Independence’, in *The Washington Quarterly*, Winter 1990, p. 130.

the mini-island states of the Caribbean like Trinidad and Tobago or Guadeloupe, with their institutionalised democratic traditions, than to African states like Ghana or Nigeria.

The strength of the democratic tradition in the Commonwealth Caribbean has been largely attributed to its particular colonial history and cultural development. The Africans who constituted a majority in most of those English-speaking states 'had been progressively and systematically stripped of much of the core cultural values with which they came', according to Selwyn Ryan, and so they had 'to accept the political value systems of the colonial elite. In time, force gave way to conscious emulation and mimicking. This they did with remarkable success'. He adds that the political culture of these Caribbeans was also shaped by the traditions of their most popular game. The rules of cricket, which stressed proper form and fair play, 'were assumed to apply to the pursuit of politics'.<sup>44</sup>

What the literally handful of democratic states in Africa all have in common is either their small size, homogeneous ethnic and religious cultures, and reasonable good or better-than-average economic records, or, in the case of Senegal, as Bobcar Sine has pointed out, a long experience with democratic politics, being 'effectively part of France' when it came to electoral politics.<sup>45</sup> It is also relevant to note in connection with Botswana's encouraging experience since 1965, that 'the liberal democratic system... is being built on and continues to find its support and continuity in the foundations of the traditional political system', as Glorlah Somolekae correctly argues.<sup>46</sup>

Are the failures of western-style constitutionalism in Africa the result of defects within the systems of government that were actually introduced?<sup>47</sup> Or, have they been caused by defects within African societies which have implemented them?<sup>48</sup> At this stage it is worthwhile to quote at some length from Ivor Jennings:

the essential problem of African democracy is... the essential problem of democracy everywhere — and it is wise to remember that only a few countries

<sup>44</sup> Selwyn Ryan, 'Problems and Prospects for the Survival of Liberal Democracy in the Commonwealth Caribbean', in *Caribbean Affairs* (Port of Spain), 5, 1, January–March 1992, pp. 44–5.

<sup>45</sup> Bobcar Sine, 'The Experience of Democracy in Senegal', in Holm and Molutsi (eds.), op. cit. p. 38.

<sup>46</sup> Glorlah Somolekae, 'Do Botswana Think and Act as Democrats?', in John Holm and Patrick Molutsi (eds.), *Democracy in Botswana* (Athens, OH, 1989), p. 75. See also, Kenneth Good, 'Interpreting the Exceptionality of Botswana', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies* (Cambridge), 30, 1, March 1992, pp. 69–96.

<sup>47</sup> Davidson, 'Questions about Nationalism'.

<sup>48</sup> B. O. Nwabueze, *Constitutionalism in the Emergent States* (London, 1973).

in the world have really made a success of it. Democracy has succeeded in Northwestern Europe and in a few countries outside Europe because it has become entwined in the traditions of the people.

If there is a strong political organization with its roots in the villages, and if the leadership is both efficient and honest, it may create an opposition to itself equally efficient and honest and so accustom the people generally to democratic ways. That is the hope, but it requires a series of favourable events. Among the obvious risks are nepotism and corruption; racialism, communalism or tribalism; dictatorship; anarchy or economic breakdown... There is no sure way of guarding against the risks. Constitutional safeguards help, but they can be overridden and in any case one must not impose too many restrictions on a developing country lest they hinder development.<sup>49</sup>

In the final analysis, the success of a constitution depends very largely on the strength of the support given to it by the people. In the African context, this means the urban and rural masses, whose primary identification and loyalty is to local communities and traditional areas, with indigenous political traditions based, in the main, on different concepts of behaviour.

The western parliamentary system, like industrial capitalism, evolved endogenously over several generations. The franchise in Britain, for instance, was enlarged and reformed in five stages, at intervals of a generation, in 1832, 1867, 1884-5, 1918 (by which time the adult population was predominantly literate), and in 1948. And it is worth pointing out that in the United States the political ideals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and certainly the period between 1840 and the end of Reconstruction, 1869-77, favoured non-partisan democracy.

It is crucial also to remember that while these important democratic reforms were underway in Europe and America, ironically the whole continent of Africa was being conquered, subjugated, and colonised in order to fulfil western imperial ambitions and 'manifest destiny'. The British democratic reforms, for instance, reflected fundamental changes in social structures, class relations, and capitalist expansion within the framework of the purpose of empire as defined above. In its developed form, the western model assumes levels of mass literacy, communication, economic development, individualism, a sense of national identification, and cultural homogeneity that simply do not yet exist in most sub-Saharan African countries.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Jennings, *op. cit.* pp. 68-9.

<sup>50</sup> Owusu, 'Culture and Democracy in West Africa', and 'Politics Without Parties'.

## COLONIAL BOUNDARIES AND CULTURE AREAS

The agony of German families divided for so many years by the Berlin Wall, arbitrarily erected as a result of what can be described as an 'imperial war', was only ended by the recent reunification of East and West Germany. Within Africa, we cannot afford to overlook the negative effects on the evolution of democratic government of partitioned cultures and peoples resulting from the inter-colonial and international boundaries that were 'fixed' at the turn of the last century. One consequence, as A. L. Asiwaju has pointed out, is that Europeans imposed new names and identities on different fractions of the same ethnic groups, thereby exaggerating the picture of cultural diversity on the continent, and complicating the new political problem of 'tribalism' and national identity.<sup>51</sup>

In Central Africa, the Tshokwe found themselves living in Zaïre, Angola, and Zambia, and the Yombe in Zaïre, Congo, and Angola (Cabinda). To the Belgians and French, the people who recognise themselves as Katshokwe (singular) and Tutshokwe (plural), were and still are known by an almost endless variety of names: Chokwe, Ahioko, Bachoko, Badjok, Babioko, Shioko, Viehioko, Kioke, etc. The following are just a few of the better-known examples of state boundaries that divide ethnic groups: Ghana–Togo: the Ewe, Konkomba, Akposso, and Moba; Ghana–Burkina Faso: the Mossi, Sissala, and Dangara Kusasi; Liberia–Guinea/Conakry: Kissi (called Kpelle in Liberia), Mende, Peul (Fulani), Krahn, and Mano. In East Africa, Somali minorities are to be found in Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti, while the Maasai and the Luo live in both Kenya and Tanzania. In Northwest Africa, the Tuareg are divided by Algeria/Libya, Algeria/Mali, Algeria/Niger, and Mali/Niger. In short, these and other ethnic splits are to be found in Central, Western, North, Northeastern, Eastern, and Southern Africa.<sup>52</sup> They cause or exacerbate civil wars, political oppression, and instability, as well as the attendant problems of refugees and poverty.

Many African countries are made up of basically village and small-town communities, rooted historically and culturally in kinship, clanship, and chieftaincy. Most of those living in either the rural areas, or in the growing urban centres, have little or no formal education. They are poor even though they produce the bulk of the gross domestic

<sup>51</sup> A. L. Asiwaju (ed.), *Partitioned Africans: ethnic relations across Africa's international boundaries, 1884–1984* (Lagos, 1984), pp. 252–3.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 256–8.



product. They are the people who are denied access to meaningful participation in political decision-making, and they are not effectively represented at local and/or national levels. Beyond the ritual exercise of their right to vote, which often has very little meaning, most poor and powerless Africans, especially illiterate women, have very little say in the formulation and implementation of policies which directly affect their welfare. The truth is, of course, that the electoral system benefits immediately only the members of the educated middle class and the rich, because they are generally the 'bosses' of any party's apparatus. As Flight-Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings, later Ghana's Head of State, complained in 1981:

Many people are beginning to feel that political parties only profess an interest in the people when it is voting time only to abandon them between elections. Meanwhile, the rich patrons of these parties are desperate to reap the harvest of what they have invested in winning power and constantly use their position for profitable deals. The party system perpetuates the wide gulf between the people and their elected representatives.<sup>53</sup>

As long ago as 1963, Jennings noted that however commendable the anxiety of African politicians to build a new liberal democratic order, 'they cannot revolutionise popular ideas by constitutional reform: they have to build the one upon the other. It is not enough to copy rules, forms and ceremonies which are full of meaning to one people and mean nothing whatever to another'.<sup>54</sup> A constitution to be workable must be meaningful to the broad masses of the people, and must involve a process of adaptation to local circumstances. Good government, as the time-honoured saying goes, is no substitute for *self*-government.

In other words, African democracy may require the integration of indigenous methods of village co-operation with innovative forms of government, combining the power of universal rights with the uniqueness of each district's or nation's own customs and respected traditions. As Barber and Watson have rightly pointed out, such solutions 'will not be easy, but they need to be found if the global aspiration to democracy is ever to become a global reality'.<sup>55</sup> Nowhere is the search for such a solution more pressing than in Africa, although according to Legum, only Burkina Faso under Thomas Sankara, Ghana under Jerry Rawlings, and Ethiopia under Mengistu Haile Mariam have made serious attempts 'to create new institutions with

<sup>53</sup> *The Believer* (Accra), 5, 5, 10 June 1981, pp. 1 and 4.

<sup>54</sup> Jennings, op. cit. p. 42.

<sup>55</sup> Barber and Watson, op. cit. p. 85.

political and economic programs that differed radically from those of their predecessors'.<sup>56</sup>

In Ghana, the P.N.D.C. Government launched a plan designed 'to create a new kind of democracy that will bring about greater efficiency and productivity in the state machinery through the involvement of the people at all levels'. The new basic units of government that have already been established are the District Assemblies, two-thirds elected and one-third appointed, the latter being mostly traditional rulers or their representatives, or the nominees of important local groups and bodies – the intermediate institutions of civil society, such as churches, market women's and farmers' associations, benevolent societies, Asafo companies, and youth clubs.

The draft constitution of the Fourth Republic was overwhelmingly approved in a national referendum held in April 1992 – about 92 per cent (3,680,973) voted 'Yes', as against 7.4 per cent (272,854) 'No'. Although the turnout was low (43.7 per cent of the registered voters), it was clearly higher than in the 1978 referendum (40.3 per cent) and the 1979 parliamentary elections (35.2 per cent).<sup>57</sup> After the ban on party politics had been lifted the following month, several rival and romantic splinters and/or off-shoots of earlier and familiar organisations (notably, the Nkrumahists and the Danquah/Busia-ists), quickly declared their intention to register and campaign for public support, as did a number of new groupings.<sup>58</sup> Despite acrimony and controversy surrounding the management of the transition process and the announced time-table coming from those opposed to the P.N.D.C., notably the Co-ordinating Committee of Democratic Forces (C.C.D.F.) and the National Union of Ghana Students (N.U.G.S.), an independent interim National Electoral Commission was established. The presidential and parliamentary elections are now scheduled to take place on 3 November and 8 December 1992, respectively, followed by the inauguration of the elected Government of the Fourth Republic on 7 January 1993.

It is obvious that the forthcoming National Assembly is being constructed on the foundations provided by the District Assemblies. Each of Ghana's 110 Districts has a population of between 100,000 and

<sup>56</sup> Legum, loc. cit. p. 129.

<sup>57</sup> *West Africa*, 11–17 May 1992, p. 809. Article 49 of the new constitution provides that a referendum should have a turnout of at least 35 per cent, with at least 70 per cent in favour, for it to be valid.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, *ibid.* 6–12 April 1992, pp. 586–7, and 8–14 June 1992, p. 956, for a discussion of the on-going leadership struggle in these groups and organisations. Also, Kabral Blay-Amihere, 'Ghana: keeping out the punks', in *New African*, July 1992, p. 18.

120,000 with, on average, about 80 people representing them in each Assembly. Although the country has experienced high rates of urban growth since World War II, the most typical settlements are village communities of less than 200 persons, often clustered closely in the south and more dispersed in the north. Many isolated hamlets find it difficult to communicate one with the other, as well as with the nearest town, primarily because of poor physical and social infrastructure.

Given that localities with a population of 5,000 or more are designated as 'towns', as early as 1970 there were 135, of which 83 were 'small' (with 5,000–10,000 inhabitants), 29 were 'medium-sized' (10,000–20,000), 21 were 'large' (20,000–100,000), and two were 'cities' (100,000+). In other words, most of these so-called 'towns' were really overgrown villages: in 33 of them the basic occupation was agriculture (including fishing, hunting, and forestry) for 50 per cent or more of the population, and in 15 others it accounted for the employment of 40–50 per cent. Most lacked basic social amenities or modern services, such as a post office, a public-health clinic, a good primary school, pipe-borne water, or electricity supply.<sup>59</sup>

It is, therefore, not surprising that most of the time and effort of the District Assemblies and community activist groups, including various non-governmental organisations (N.G.O.s), have been devoted to mobilising resources and communal labour to build or rehabilitate the physical and social infrastructure. Some indication of their favoured priorities may be gained from an analysis of what was accomplished during the first two phases of the country's Economic Recovery Programme (E.R.P.), 1984–9. At the top of all the rural projects undertaken came education (41 per cent), followed by health facilities (14 per cent), electrification (12.8 per cent), roads (9.2 per cent), potable water (8.3 per cent), toilet and sanitary facilities (5.5 per cent), construction/improvement of markets (4.9 per cent), dams (1.9 per cent), and bridges (1.7 per cent).<sup>60</sup> Some idea of what has been achieved (and what still needs to be done) may be gained from the fact that although it is the policy of the P.N.D.C. for all 110 District capitals to be supplied with electricity by December 1992, only 54 had been connected to the national grid as of March 1991.

In this socio-economic environment, it is almost impossible – given the enormous financial, physical, and administrative constraints – to satisfy the basic criteria of democratic government as identified by

<sup>59</sup> Kodwo Ewusi, 'The Towns of Ghana and their Levels of Development', in *Universitas* (Legon), 6, 1, May 1977, pp. 156–68.

<sup>60</sup> Personal communication, 1990, from Annorbah-Sarpei, a Ghanaian N.G.O. member and consultant.

Jennings: namely, strong centralised, top-down political organisations with their roots in the villages, as well as an efficient and honest leadership in both government and opposition. It may be useful to recall at this stage the small, provocative book written by Chinua Achebe, entitled *The Trouble with Nigeria* (London, 1983), because some of his frank observations are still considered by many Africans to apply to the continent as a whole:

Nigeria is...one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun... It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar... Nigerians are what they are only because their leaders are *not* what *they* should be (pp. 9–10).

On the question of poor leadership, one wished that the author had paid more attention to the widespread corrupting influence on political behaviour of the legitimate demands in the daily struggle for bare necessities of life in the context of kinship, clanship, and ethnic community pressures, loyalties, and interests. Achebe's polemic was published at a time when he was campaigning vigorously, as the deputy national president of the People's Redemption Party, in the Federal elections of Nigeria. They were soon followed by a military coup, whose leaders shared, it would seem, many of Achebe's opinions.

Although all political activities and organisations were prohibited for a number of years by Nigeria's military leaders, it is one of the paradoxes of modern African politics that they have now imposed a wholly government-financed two-party system that resembles the U.S. presidential model, in order to streamline party competition and reduce political chaos for a return to western-style democracy by early 1993.

Even if Jean-Jacques Rousseau did argue, *inter alia*, for the necessity of forcing men to be free, Montesquieu was able to show convincingly that freedom grew gradually out of the history of a country, and was not something that could be imposed by one group of people on another. Unless the re-birth of democracy in Africa is rooted and grounded in the villages and small communities, the end-product is bound to be élitist and another example of the failed urban-biased development. Looked at from the viewpoint of millions of villagers, the global democratic movement sweeping across Africa will only be regarded as a new form of imposition, another 'imperialism', unless it gives ordinary men and women a much more effective 'hand and a say' in the management of their affairs.<sup>61</sup> Ghana's new District Assemblies

<sup>61</sup> Cf. David Kimble, *The Machinery of Self-Government* (Harmondsworth, 1953), pp. 9–10. He asked nearly 40 years ago, 'Is it possible to devise governmental machinery whereby the

are meant, therefore, in the words of Rawlings, to give all the people, 'farmers, workers, soldiers, the rich and poor', a chance to be part of the decision-making process.<sup>62</sup>

#### GHANA'S DISTRICT ASSEMBLIES

The new form of participatory grass-roots democracy being evolved in Ghana under the leadership of the P.N.D.C. Government is based partly on local village traditions and would seem to be a realistic first step towards a lasting solution to some of Africa's endemic political and economic difficulties, liberating the enormous long-term development potential of the countryside. As Michael Lipton has pointed out:

[the rural sector in the Third World] contains most of the poverty, and most of the low-cost sources of potential advance; but the urban sector contains most of the [western style] articulateness, organization, and power. So the urban classes have been able to 'win' most of the rounds of the struggle with the countryside; but by so doing they have made the development process needlessly slow and unfair.<sup>63</sup>

The Districts and District Assemblies established in accordance with the Local Government Law, 1988 (P.N.D.C.L. 207), and the Local Government (Amendment No. 2) Law, 1990, are clearly a remarkable departure from the previous half-hearted and piecemeal attempts to reform local government which collapsed. Among the most important innovations are the following:

(1) Non-partisan, individual merit-based, elections to a District Assembly must be held every three years. Candidates are to be identified by photographs instead of symbols, and do not have to pay a deposit. They are expected to air their views and/or answer questions by mounting a 'common platform', and those that become members of a District Assembly are required to meet their constituents at least once every six weeks.

(2) A District Assembly shall (i) be responsible for the overall development of the District; (ii) formulate programmes and strategies for the effective mobilisation and utilisation of the human, physical, financial, and other resources in the District; (iii) promote and support

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majority of citizens, acting freely, have an effective say in the decisions that have to be made, and a control on the people who make them? ... Is it possible for large numbers of ordinary people – not just a few well-known politicians, merchants, chiefs, lawyers, or civil servants – to have a hand and a say in what is being done?' <sup>62</sup> *Daily Graphic* (Accra), 1 January 1982, p. 1.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Lipton, *Why Poor People Stay Poor: urban bias in world development* (Cambridge, Mass. 1977), p. 13.

productive activity and social development in the District, and remove any obstacles to initiative and development; and (iv) ensure ready access to the courts and public tribunals in the District for the promotion of justice.

(3) A District Assembly may conduct its business in either English or any Ghanaian language common to the communities in the District.<sup>64</sup>

Other notable features of the new system are the establishment of (i) sub-district structures which include (a) metropolitan and municipal assemblies, (b) urban, zonal, town, or area councils, and (c) unit committees, and (ii) regional co-ordinating councils, all meant to make local government truly democratic, efficient, and accessible to ordinary citizens.

These 1988–90 enactments have radically transformed centre–periphery relations by redefining the rôle of the state in the countryside, and by giving extensive new powers – legislative, executive, and judicial – to the 110 District Assemblies, which are both territorial and cultural units of government and administration, thus fulfilling one of the basic aims of the 31st December Revolution. Indeed, this popular legislation may turn out to be one of the most significant and lasting achievements of P.N.D.C. rule.

The chapter on local government and decentralisation in the 1992 (new Fourth Republic) constitution includes the following important features:

(i) a reaffirmation of the commitment for local government and administration to be decentralised;

(ii) the provision for Parliament (National Assembly) to make laws to secure the transfer of functions, powers, responsibilities, and resources to local government units to enhance their capacity to co-ordinate the implementation and monitoring of development plans and projects, to secure a fair degree of financial autonomy, and to enable local people to participate in decision-making;

(iii) the preservation, as far as possible, of the existing District boundaries;

(iv) the retention of the present composition and non-partisan character of the District Assemblies, as provided for under P.N.D.C.L. 207, except that the maximum number of those appointed by the central government has been reduced from one-third to 30 per cent;

(v) the decision that M.P.s representing constituencies within each

<sup>64</sup> For example, the Agona District Assembly conducts its business primarily in Twi or Fante, the dominant local languages.

District should be *ex-officio* members of its Assembly without voting rights;

(vi) the retention of the provision for the revocation of the mandate of Assembly members who abuse or misuse their authority, or fail to serve in the interest of their constituents;

(vii) the making of provisions for further decentralisation and for protecting the District Assemblies from the control of Parliament;

(viii) the retention of the Regional Co-ordinating Councils, with the addition of a maximum of two chiefs to their membership;

(ix) the retention of the office of the District Secretary (renamed Chief Executive) of the Presiding Member, and the four-year tenure of the District Assemblies; and

(x) the creation of a Common Fund for District Assemblies into which 5 per cent of the total annual national revenue is to be paid, as well as the establishment of a Common Fund Administrator.<sup>65</sup>

The Assemblies have had the salutary effect of increasing local autonomy and raising political consciousness and participation, notably by producing both elected and appointed members who are more representative of, and responsive to, the local electorate. Such shifts in the balance of power in the Districts should hopefully encourage more powerful groups and interests to become important constituencies at the national level. Thus this kind of local power and autonomy is likely to promote rather than weaken (as claimed in the past) national unity and citizenship. The expectation is that decentralisation will provide, at least in the long run, mechanisms for ensuring that Assembly members and other leaders become increasingly sensitive to the widest possible range of interests, not least because it is such responsiveness that distinguishes true democracies from 'electoral dictatorships'.

Since the decentralised District Assemblies were introduced in early 1988, a number of official delegations from sub-Saharan African countries, including Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Tanzania, have visited Ghana to observe and study how well the new system is working. In March 1991, the third regional conference of the International Union of Local Authorities (Africa Section), held in Gaborone, decided unanimously to ask Ghana to host the fourth regional conference in 1993, many of those attending being clearly fascinated by the

<sup>65</sup> See *Local Government Information Digest* (Accra), 5, 2, March–April 1992, p. 3, for critical comments on the above constitutional provisions by Kwamena Ahwoi, P.N.D.C. Secretary for Local Government. Also, ch. 11, 'Decentralization and Local Government', *Report of the Committee of Experts, 1991*, pp. 144–55.

descriptions presented about the evolving structures of grassroots democracy.<sup>66</sup>

#### ‘CIVIC DEMOCRACY’ AND DEVELOPMENT

What are the distinctive features of this new participatory and representative democracy? First of all, an attempt is being made in Ghana to build real and effective ‘people power’ from local communities upwards on a non-partisan basis. The criterion of democracy in this system cannot simply be procedural, because fair and free elections based on the principle of one citizen one vote, however essential, are not enough, given the even more important need to articulate and pursue collective goals in accordance with the popular will. This has led to the revival and mushrooming throughout Ghana, and elsewhere, of activist development-oriented civic organisations and mutual-aid societies that stem from a great variety of interests and affiliations, including those based in the village, town, ethnic group, and/or family. As explained by Rawlings:

For us democracy cannot simply mean holding District Assembly elections or any other elections periodically whilst we continue to endure poverty, misery, illiteracy, hunger and poor health facilities and whilst many of our able-bodied citizens are unable to find employment. We cannot divorce any discussion on the structures or processes of government from the economic reality of providing for basic human needs for society.<sup>67</sup>

Secondly, it is a system that builds on indigenous political traditions of local self-government that assume the existence of shared ethical and moral values throughout a given community. It is widely believed in Ghana that the District Assembly can be regarded as the model of a well-functioning ‘traditional communalist organization of indigenous society’. According to an editorial in *The Ghanaian Times*, the new local government system has ‘built-in checks and balances against abuses of power and position’; the Assembly members will find it difficult to be irresponsible and indulge in the old ‘party politics’ practice of ‘self-seeking and self-aggrandisement’ under the full gaze of the local community.<sup>68</sup> Since the Assembly members are surrounded by what one of them in Agona District described to me as the new ‘Asafo

<sup>66</sup> *Local Government Information Digest*, 4, 4, July–August 1991, p. 1.

<sup>67</sup> J. J. Rawlings, ‘Address at the Opening Session of the National Commission for Democracy Seminar, Sunyani, 5th July’, in *Home Front Ghanaian News and Views* (Accra, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> *The Ghanaian Times*, 11 July 1992, p. 2.



watchdogs' – namely, the C.D.R.s and an increasing number of politically aware citizens – this newspaper editorial certainly has a point. It goes on to observe that

the most respected people in the village community owe their high public status and esteem to their service in the community. The most respected elder is not necessarily the one with a lot of money, a big house, a large well-educated family and so on... But each owes his respect to definable services to the community... In this communalist organization, the only reward an elder receives for his service to the community is the satisfaction of being among those whose counsel and planning lead to the progress of the community.<sup>69</sup>

The great popular attraction of such a 'chieftaincy model' derives from its language, symbols, rituals, and working assumptions which are widely shared and understood by the bulk of the population, and which unite them in the pursuit of common goals. For most villagers in Ghana, chieftaincy still serves as a vital link between their past, present, and future. Indeed, throughout the 110 Districts in 1989 there were as many as 32,000 chiefs of all categories: paramount, divisional, sub-chiefs, *adikro*, and headmen (men and women), from every socio-economic background.

Despite its inherent social stratification, chieftaincy embodies shared values and virtues of accountability, service, probity; the tradition of voluntarism and self-help; and the spirit which extols the committed and total involvement of the members of a community in the formulation and implementation of policies for their welfare. According to Joyce Aryee, P.N.D.C. member and former Secretary for Education, 'people power' as conceived in the on-going revolution in Ghana implies institutional control over those who hold public office, including the power of the governed to dismiss or replace them without violence:

Thus for a system to be democratic, it must include institutional arrangements by which the governed can question, check, and control office holders. The control of rulers by the ruled over the uses to which institutions of power are put cannot just be periodical in the sense of a right to vote in or out leaders which they exercise once every four or five years as is the case with a multi-party parliamentary style democracy.<sup>70</sup>

The misuse and abuse of power by corrupt and insensitive educated élites, both civilian and military, has contributed to Ghana's present economic difficulties.<sup>71</sup> These leaders have proved to be unwilling or

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Joyce Aryee, 'Public Opinion in a Democracy', in *The CDR Eagle* (Accra), 4, 3, 1988, p. 12.

<sup>71</sup> See Maxwell Owusu, 'Custom and Coups: a juridical interpretation of civil order and disorder in Ghana', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 24, 1, March 1986, pp. 69–99, and

incapable of sharing real power with other groups in the society, especially the masses of rural poor, with little or no education, who produce the bulk of the wealth of the nation. Their primary concern remained the desire to retain their privileged position in society, and they had much to lose if the power of the lower classes or the poor were to increase. So they continued to advocate, without essential and timely modifications to suit local circumstances, Euro-American-type constitutions which were frequently honoured in their breach, albeit calculated to preserve their monopoly of political power and leadership. These élites have proved, in general, to be uncompromising opponents of any institutions of popular power that could be controlled from the grassroots, however genuinely democratic.

Ghana's decentralised framework allows national ministerial departments to become integral components of the work of each District Assembly. In addition, the system relies for its operation on 'ceded revenues' (as opposed to 'grants-in-aid'), and these are meant effectively to insulate the financing of local government from the ups and downs of national budgetary performance. Lastly, and of considerable significance, the new set-up integrates rural development in local government. In the words of a recent quasi-official editorial:

there is no doubt that we can nurture the district assembly system to form the basis for equitable development of the country... bringing accelerated growth and development not only in the districts but also to all towns, villages, hamlets and other settlements.<sup>72</sup>

Although the performances of the 110 district-level structures have proved to be much better than those of the previous 65 local councils,<sup>73</sup> there are a number of serious problems that still need to be faced. As all concerned know only too well, there are human, financial, structural, technical, legal, and resource 'bottlenecks' which continue to impede the functioning of most District Assemblies. These include:

(i) poor, chaotic, or non-existent physical and social infrastructures – for example, a shortage of both office and residential accommodation in most of the 45 newly-created Districts;

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'Rebellion, Revolution, and Tradition: reinterpreting coups in Ghana', in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* (Cambridge), 31, 2, April 1989, pp. 372–97.

<sup>72</sup> *Local Government Information Digest*, 3, 2, March–April 1990, p. 32.

<sup>73</sup> For example, according to the 1992 Auditor-General's Report on Local Government for the period ended 31 December 1988, many of the 65 old councils had no approved estimates and only 22 presented annual accounts for validation by the Auditor-General. Their operations were characterised by unauthorised and improper payments, inadequate revenue collection, poor accountability, and misappropriation of funds by council treasurers. *Ibid.* 5, 1, January–February 1992, pp. 34–5.

(ii) financial constraints, exacerbated by difficulties in generating enough revenues and paying salaries and redeployment benefits;

(iii) conflicts stemming from existing laws which regulate relationships between the departments of the Districts and those of the Central Government;

(iv) not enough skilled manpower to staff all the 110 Districts – for example, only about one-third have substantive district administrative officers who, along with the district secretaries and presiding members, make up the executive of each Assembly;

(v) absence of resources to provide adequate back-up logistics support, including transportation and office equipment; and

(vi) lack of adequate incentives to induce administrators and technical personnel to accept, and stay in, 'hardship stations': namely, those Districts without electricity, pipe-borne water, adequate housing, and basic sanitation.<sup>74</sup>

Since the District Assembly elections in 1988 there has been a rapid increase in the number of active community organisations and other popular organs, such as the already mentioned Committees for the Defence of the Revolution (C.D.R.s) and the 31st December Women's Organisation, thereby significantly expanding the opportunities for ordinary citizens to participate in the making and implementation of decisions that affect their everyday lives. It is worthy of note that the 1988 elections created much more interest than those for the National Assembly in 1979, with average turn-outs of 60 and 40 per cent, respectively, of those registered. Even in Districts with a lower rate of participation, such as Accra, where only about 44 per cent of those registered actually voted, this was a marked improvement on the 18 per cent in 1979.

In the Agona District in the Central Region, where the average voter turn-out of 61.4 per cent was slightly above the national average, I found clear evidence that a great many people from nearly every walk of life were taking advantage of their enlarged participatory opportunities. For instance, during the canvassing for votes that took place on the pre-election 'common platform', there were many spontaneous and lively give-and-take encounters between the electorate and the candidates, the latter being heckled to demonstrate their overall fitness to hold office. Although all the 48 electoral areas experienced non-partisan elections, they were keenly contested by as many as 136 candidates (including six women), of whom 44 were teachers and 71

<sup>74</sup> See *ibid.* 3, 3, May–June 1990, pp. 9–15, for a discussion of some of these problems.

gave farming as their work, the two dominant occupations in the District.

Of the 48 C.D.R. *cadres* who canvassed in Agona, 33 were returned — in Swedru, the District headquarters, 11 out of 13 were elected, including one young woman (two others were later appointed as members). Their astounding electoral success demonstrated the growing grassroots strength of the C.D.R. in the District under the able leadership of the District Secretary, Kweku Jehu Appiah, and the C.D.R.'s District Organising Assistant, R. E. K. Tsotome. Although the Assembly is obviously dominated by *cadres* and chiefs, it seems clear that the traditional leaders, at least in Agona District, are not out of step with the democratic aspirations and economic development efforts of the ordinary citizenry.

Obviously there are far too many men at present dominating the District Assemblies, and indeed national politics, because without the effective participation of more women there can be no sustainable progress and genuine 'consensus' democracy. Out of the national total of 6,907 Assembly members elected/nominated at the district level in 1988–9, only 460 (that is, 6.6 per cent) were women, of whom the greater majority were appointed.<sup>75</sup>

The C.D.R.s form the bed-rock of Ghana's democratic transformation, being designed to organise the masses for popular participation in making and implementing decisions in local communities and workplaces. Their functions include checking exploitation, corruption, and abuse of power, as well as mobilising the people, especially unemployed youths, and organising them into democratic co-operatives to raise the productivity of the countryside. In carrying out these functions, the C.D.R.s liaise with District Assemblies, local chiefs, and as many action-oriented voluntary bodies as possible. The fact is that decentralisation has provided many important new avenues for community development. Ordinary people have been involved in the nomination of members for their District Assemblies, a remarkable departure from the control of local candidates by urban-based élites and party bosses; many stood and won their elections, and they are participating in the local development committees that have been set up in the electoral areas.

For the masses of villagers and small-town people who have accepted the objectives of Ghana's democratic reforms, the expansion of political participation through decentralisation has provided extensive and

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 3, 2, March–April 1990, p. 32.

meaningful opportunities to have an impact on the allocation of such essential 'public goods' as primary health-care, immunisation against the most deadly childhood diseases, functional literacy, environmental and afforestation programmes, and public safety initiatives. For instance, at the end of 1989, the first year of the District Assembly in Agona, the 11 branches of the 31st December Women's Movement were engaged in a variety of rural development projects, such as growing cow-peas, pepper, cassava, and ginger; processing *gari* and manufacturing soap; and running nursery and day-care centres. In short, an increasing number of ordinary men and women now have better access to credit, land, markets, and other scarce resources, thus contributing to higher productivity and growing incomes.

It can be argued that much of this modest economic improvement must be attributed to the admittedly unpopular recovery measures that the Government has pursued since 1983.<sup>76</sup> Be that as it may, of equal if not greater importance in the long arduous struggle for a better life, is the organic political evolution now taking place which may mark the beginning of Ghana's real independence.

<sup>76</sup> For an important discussion of the P.N.D.C.'s economic policies, see the essays in Donald Rothchild (ed.), *Ghana: the political economy of recovery* (Boulder, 1991). Also, Maxwell Owusu, 'The Devil and the Holy War; international capitalism, populism and Ghana's Economic Recovery Programme', 90th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Chicago, 20-24 November 1991, and James C. W. Ahikpor, 'Rawlings, Economic Policy Reform, and the Poor: consistency or betrayal?', in *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 29, 4, December 1991, pp. 583-600.