

DEMOCRACY, POLITICAL PROTEST AND TRANSITIONS

Adebayo Olukoshi: «The process of democratic deceleration in Africa has been accompanied by a complex of discontents»

Adebayo Olukoshi, Oscar Mateos



Adebayo Olukoshi is a Researcher and Distinguished Professor at the Wits School of Governance of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa. With a long career in the field of international relations, governance and human rights, he has served as Director of the United Nations African Institute for Economic Development and Planning in Dakar (Senegal) and, until recently, he was the Head of the Regional Office for Africa and West Asia of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). Interviewed by Oscar Mateos, Adebayo Olukoshi reflects on the several waves of political reforms and transitions towards democratic governance in Africa, and analyzes the setbacks occurring in many African countries, where we are witnessing a process of democratic slowdown accompanied by discontent and disaffection. At the same time, Olukoshi also highlights the repoliticizing process of young people, leading protest

movements across the continent.

Recent events in Sudan and Ethiopia have raised eyebrows internationally due to the current levels of violence. Both countries were praised just two years ago as very promising political transitions in the continent. How do you assess the current unstable situation in both contexts?

First and foremost, in both Ethiopia and Sudan, using them as illustrative examples of the overall situation in Africa, it seems to me that we are at the present time confronted with the challenge of building new energies behind the quest for continued democratic governance on the continent in the face of a resurgent authoritarianism around the world and across the continent. I am saying this in terms of my own sense of periodization of the contemporary transition to democratic governance on the continent. Let's recall that the first wave of that transitional process began in the early 1990s when citizens took to the streets of the Republic of Benin against a long ruling dictatorship which had held sway for many decades and which effectively monopolized unaccountable power. Those demonstrations symbolized, as it were, the beginning of the end of military and single party rule on the continent.

30 years have passed since those events took place in the Republic of Benin which triggered the sovereign national conferences that were constituted in several Francophone African countries to chart a new path forward. At that time, we also saw a push for the convening of politico-constitutional reform conferences in places where sovereign national conferences were not held. The outcome of the various reform processes was the emergence across Africa of a new wave of multiparty politics and electoral pluralism along with all of the constitutional engineering that accompanied them, most notably, the introduction of term limitation as a way of dealing with the scourge of life presidencies.

For a period of time, the political reforms that were introduced worked. I would say, perhaps, for the first decade of the transition, from the 1990s leading us into this current millennium, we saw a number of interesting, even dramatic changes taking place. We saw some interesting developments that took place in the context of the advance and consolidation of electoral pluralism. For the first time in many countries, for example, an alternation of power took place peacefully, not through a *coup d'état* but through the ballot box. We saw power peacefully transferred from an incumbent ruler to another. In the context of that alternation of power, we have seen some developments that were sometimes unthinkable a decade or two earlier whereby long ruling incumbents were voted out of power by the electorate.

What examples from this historical context would you highlight?

Looking at the African continent at the time, in places like Zambia, the slogan "the hour has come" captured the imagination of the electorate and brought an end to the long rule of Kenneth Kaunda and the United National Independence Party, which he presided over. We have seen election management bodies come from there, asserting their autonomy and independence from partisan political forces, including the kinds of untoward influences

which incumbents might want to exercise on them. One of the best examples celebrated in the 1990s was the Ghana Electoral Commission and its celebrated pioneer Chair, Afari Gyan. We saw an acceptance of and respect for term limitation in which presidents who served two successive terms stepped down voluntarily and without fuss from power at the end of their second term. For the first time, ruling parties defeated at the polls were replaced by opposition parties on the basis of agreed rules of electoral competition. Some countries had their first ever civilian to civilian transition during this period. I can cite many other examples, but these processes of reform and change also began to slow down and stall as we entered into the new millennium. The process of democratic deceleration and even reversal which we have seen has been accompanied by what I might call a complex of discontents.

So what hasn't worked in recent years?

Discontents have played out at different levels. Democratic political transitions didn't seem to have been full of motion but have not been consistently and universally accompanied by significant changes in the substance of power, politics and policy. Beyond the initial jubilation around the voting in of new faces, new political parties, respect for constitutional term limits, media freedom and licensing of civil society organizations to operate freely, the key concerns of social and economic livelihood and advancement have proved to be far more elusive. So although basic civil liberties and rights already enshrined in the new constitutions were largely respected for a period of time, there was a certain hollowness about politics that soon translated into an electoral fatigue.

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In terms of the substantive experiences of the people and the much-anticipated dividends of democracy, these were very slow in coming. For the majority of the people, political transition and power alternation in the way in which they have happened so far seem increasingly like a game of musical chairs rather than a decisive shift for the better in their fortunes. There is a feeling that is widely shared that the general experience to date is one of the more it appears to change, the worse it seems to become for the majority. On top of this, the quality of governance has also begun to deteriorate in a lot of cases. So, not only were the new democracies failing to deliver dividends, including those of a social nature that would enable people to associate improvements in livelihood with the experience of democratic governance. The quality of democratic governance itself also began to suffer setbacks, and that's when we began to see opportunist amendments to constitutions that were painstakingly negotiated just a few years earlier. Clauses relating to term limitation have been jettisoned in at least 13 or so countries.

Attempts to amend term limits seem to be at the center of the dispute, but what are the structural issues to be understood?

By the end of 2010, term limitations had been expunged from the constitutions, of a growing number of countries and incumbents were beginning to promote what has been described as a new presidentialism in which power is basically appropriated and concentrated in the presidency, reminiscent of the old “big man” dictatorships that we had during the period of single party and military rule. In the early phase of the transition from authoritarianism, and despite their imperfections, there was a general feeling that the first wave of elections that took place generally reflected the choice of the citizenry. A decade or so after, we have begun to see investments by political elites in the manipulation and rigging of elections in the classic ways in which we knew such political malpractices in the past.

For many citizens, reinforcing the feeling that democracy was not necessarily delivering substantive change was also the concern that regardless of who you voted into office and regardless of whatever promises they may have made to you, whether in their manifesto or in their campaign rallies, the policies that were pursued were exactly the same, especially in terms of their economic and social policies. Many of us on the continent began to refer to the phenomenon of Africa’s “choiceless democracies” in the late 1990s. These are elected governments that come into office but have absolutely no possibility to alter the established economic and social policy framework that has been put in place to conform with the demands of a global neoliberalism overseen by the IMF and World Bank. Once these governments come into power, despite their planned economic and social development agenda, they find that they are required to use their legitimacy to enforce austerity and deflation. Effectively problems of poverty and inequality that have been structural to Africa’s development experience for decades simply got worse under the watch of the elected government and began to produce the disaffection that in a lot of cases has produced discontent.

What are the social and political consequences of this situation?

In a context in which development is blocked and the state is absent or distant in social and territorial-administrative terms, discontent has resulted in a resurgence of ethno-regional identities and religious irredentism and radical extremism, among other consequences. Many structural gaps exist in the political economy that are exploited by a range of religious zealots, criminal gangs, and political godfathers who are able to entice some of the long term unemployed in a highly youthful continent. Picture a situation where 60 to 70 percent of young people are in long-term unemployment or underemployment and you will see the tinderbox on which many countries are sitting. For Boko Haram or Islamic State West Africa Province, or al-Qaida in the Maghreb or Al-Shabab in Somalia, it takes less than five dollars to recruit young people into their insurgencies and promise them a new “El Dorado”.

When you look at the specific examples of Ethiopia and the Sudan, what is immediately striking is that amidst the jubilation that followed the emergence in Ethiopia of Prime

Minister Abiy or the negotiated pact between the military and the civilian opposition forces that provoked the fall of Omar al-Bashir, you are confronted with a situation in which those governments have found it difficult to push the kinds of social and economic policies that will empower citizens and make them effective stakeholders in the democratic governance process. Unsurprisingly, popular enthusiasm has been lost quickly as the harsh realities of making ends meet on a day to day basis take over for the majority of the people. In that context, you begin to see a flowering of all kinds of discontents, including even in some cases, a real nostalgia for the old dictatorships that could “control” things and offer “strong” leadership.

Precisely, one of the things that probably have attracted most analysis on African realities in the last 10 years has to do with what has been also called “African springs” or the political protest that have taken place in dozens of contexts such as Senegal or Burkina Faso. Could you briefly assess the meaning and the perspectives of these political protests?

One of the encouraging signs of the failure to reconcile democracy and development is the process of re-politicization, particularly of the youth. We see a contrasting response to a trend that took hold after the first decade of the transition, by which voter turnout in young African democracies went down steeply and people began to lose faith in the ballot box as a mechanism for effective, not just formalistic or ritualistic change. That, in turn, basically created the impetus for this re-politicization of at least a section of the youth. Self-organization in order to shape the political momentum and agenda has become the order of the day, and there is really no shortage of occasions for young people to rally around broad social causes that are germane to citizen empowerment and an improvement in the quality of life of the people.

In the case of Y'en A Marre in Senegal, for example, what started as a resistance to what was perceived as Abdoulaye Wade's attempt to entrench himself in power became a movement that served as the voice of citizens and the conscience of society around, for example, questions of electricity tariffs. That politicization that grew out of a specific trigger point and propelled young people into action on a broader agenda of social and political reform has emerged as an important element of the current political conjuncture in many parts of the continent. In other words, out of the disempowerment created by stalled or partial democratization has been a process of self-empowerment in which young people are serving as the voices of citizens to push the political elites to reform the system in a way that will make it more participatory, more accountable, and more responsive to their concerns.

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That’s exactly what happened in Burkina Faso. The trigger was the attempt by Blaise Compaoré to perpetuate himself in power but the protest went beyond a rejection of a continued and blatant power monopolization to encompass a wholesale demand for political reform. In that framework, the youth broadened their agenda to become the voice and the conscience of society, similar to the End SARS movement in Nigeria. It was not even so much a question of class differentiation amongst the youth (regarding End SARS), but the youth as a category, rich and poor, coming together to say, actually, we can do better than this in Nigeria, and we have no business being pulled down and held back by an undignified political elite that is so immersed in making deals and treating governance as an exercise in the corrupt administration of public affairs, of which police brutality is just a small slice.

These movements are strong enough to make a significant dent on the political scene and to compel attention to what they are worried about. The question, which we still need to answer is whether they are organized and coherent enough to represent a veritable alternative that can be sustained into the future. The example of what we have seen in the Sudan, Ethiopia, Algeria and what may be going on in Tunisia suggests that these movements still have some way to go to attain full maturity, to the point of representing not just a soft underbelly of the political elite, but being able to constitute an alternative power that can capture the state and re-imagine it according to the vision that propelled them into action.

What is the political course of these social movements and how are the parties in power reacting?

The biggest challenge facing the movements is how to translate protest into political power of the kind that can actually capture the center of the state and administer the country, according to a new vision. They need to be able to do this in the face of a whole range of countervailing measures deployed by the ruling elites to try to contain the movements. In addition to using raw repression and violence, they have unleashed various divide and rule tactics, and also clamped down on social media. To give you an example, in Nigeria, in the face of the use of crowdfunding in which volunteers donate to the causes of the young people in order to help to sustain their push for structural reforms, the central Bank of Nigeria has been targeting accounts that receive money from crowdfunding sources and shutting them down, or even banning the use of cryptocurrencies which they cannot control. This is all done in a bid to limit the capacity of the young people to self-organize on a national scale. The Central Bank of Nigeria has even gone so far as to say it is a crime to transact in cryptocurrencies in Nigeria. In Senegal, the government at a point went after the financiers of the Y’en Marre leadership in order to cripple their ability to organize, including even targeting NGOs that were thought to be financing the movement through programmatic resources.

Which do you think are the similarities and differences that African political

protests are sharing with worldwide waves of political mobilization?

I think the African experience is part of that broad dynamic of discontent and resistance that we are seeing on a global scale. After all, the transition of the 1990s in Africa basically proceeded on the models of democratization practiced elsewhere in the world. Thus, most of the reforms that were undertaken to advance electoral pluralism amounted to mimicking both the processes and institutional mechanisms of the so-called mature and advanced democracies, especially the United States and Europe

The tragedy, of course, is that by the time the transition in Africa was taking place in the 1990s, as part of the so-called global third wave of democratization, European countries like Spain, Italy, France and others had also already begun to experience serious citizen dissatisfaction with democratic institutions, including political parties and parliaments that seemed to have exhausted their possibilities. In the period following the Second World War, Western political parties were mostly vibrant with a lot of members and with a lot of ideas and with initiatives that drove both the reconstruction and the democratization of Europe. However, by the end of the 1980s, we began to see a steep fall in voter participation and in political party membership. Confidence in institutions of governance, including parliaments, started to weaken and a deficit of trust between citizens and governments, between state and society, was already in evidence.

Those same institutional mechanisms and procedures were embraced on the African continent and, unsurprisingly, they have not been capable of being the bearers of the interests and concerns of citizens as the embodiment of their sovereignty in the democratic system. That exact same challenge is what democracies are facing all over the world. The specific manifestation of the problem may differ from place to place. In Europe, for example, I see the rise in right wing nationalism, including anti-immigrant phobia, as being more or less a mirror image of the resurgence of ethno-regionalism in Africa. The rise of xenophobia in some parts of the continent is a direct outcome of the failings of democratic governance to deliver development. Blaming the non-native others or embracing ethnic irredentism or radical extremism are a direct outcome of a system of democratization that is unable to deliver development. Democratization anchored on neo-liberalism produces a dead end to development.

Thus, both in Africa and in other global contexts, they seem to share the same structural problems.

I think common to all of them, even if this is not always stated as openly as may be desirable, is that policy space for advancing citizen welfare and economic empowerment is highly limited. If you take the fiscal responsibility pacts that African countries were made to embrace by the Bretton Woods institutions, written into the constitutions of a number of countries or passed into binding legislation in others, they are not different in essence from the European Commission rule limiting the budget deficits of member states to not more than 3% of their GDP.

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Once in office, most elected governments in Africa quickly find that the rules are set already and economic policy-making is taken out of the domain of politics for the sake of “rationality” and “predictability” and all of the things that the World Bank and the IMF used to sell in their structural adjustment package. Therefore, politics is reduced to essentially a beauty contest around very inconsequential issues, a game of personalities and prejudices peddled by politicians. It should not be so-called rational economics that determines the frame, content, and the form of politics. Rather, it should be the issues which citizens aspire for and agree to buy into in terms of a national vision that should be the basis around which we construct economic policy. This is the sure way to move us out of the orthodoxy into which democracies are being locked, Democratic politics by definition and where it works effectively is actually more likely to produce heterodox economic policies. To lock democracies into a narrow orthodoxy is to empty politics of meaning, disempower citizens, and eliminate choice.

The Washington consensus somehow has been challenged by not just the Beijing consensus, but also other cooperation strategies which have made up issues of space for new countries from the Gulf region, northern Africa or Asian countries. Which is the impact of this competition for African countries?

Overall, we have seen the potentiality for the emergence of global alternatives to global neoliberalism, but in most cases and places, they have remained potentialities. The option, for example, of the Beijing consensus is one which China itself is pushing very cautiously in so far as much of China’s engagement with Africa has been pursued concurrently with the continuing overarching dominance of Africa’s policy environment by the Bretton Woods institutions.

There is no country on the African continent today that has successfully defined a framework of policy making that enables it to have full control of its social and economic affairs without the involvement of the Bretton Woods institutions in setting their domestic policy priorities. I have seen occasional salvos that are fired against neoliberalism spiced with the rhetoric of looking East, but in a lot of cases, it is really more of a negotiating ploy to float a China option when IMF loans don’t come on time or are denied outrightly. Countries go to China and get a loan that enables them to meet certain of their obligations. From the point of view of China, such loans are to be paid back on agreed terms. There is nothing to suggest that China is interested, for now at least, in dismantling the global framework for financial governance overseen by the IMF and the World Bank.

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