Francophone Africa: destabilization and aspirations for freedom

by Jacques Cheminade

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Throughout French-speaking Africa, from Diamey to Libreville and from Dakar to Cotonou, passing through Abidjan, students and workers have taken to the streets to protest the lowering of their living standards and to demand true political liberty. They are thus calling into question, for the first time in such a generalized way, the political systems which have failed, after more than 30 years of independence, to get overall development and lasting growth under way in their countries.

What is occurring is a challenge both to their forms of government and to their protector-country, France. This challenge should not be underestimated. The World Bank reveals in its latest report that the Gross Domestic Product of sub-Saharan Africa amounts to about $150 billion for 450 million inhabitants, a figure barely equal to that of Belgium, which has 10 million people! For at least 10 years, the Gross National Product and the food consumption, the standard of living, as well as the quality of medical care and education, have steadily fallen in Africa.

The students, privileged persons in regions where illiteracy and rural misery reign supreme, are the first to react—along with the other relatively "privileged" class, the civil service workers—because they know and fear for the future. They see the very basis of the state sinking before their eyes, while an ultra-privileged class, the accomplice of the international financial institutions, dances on the volcano and salts away its gains overseas.

Life expectancy is falling back to an average of 40 years. Infant mortality is the world's highest. Classical epidemics are returning—trypanosomiasis, malaria, yellow fever—while AIDS progresses with lightning speed.

Pillage of raw materials

Presidents Félix Houphouët-Boigny of Senegal and Omar Bongo of Gabon were certainly perfectly right when they blamed the multinational corporations and the policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. It is absolutely true that the multinationals want to create in Africa a situation of disorder and destabilization, so as to prevent any resistance from being organized against the deliberate drop in prices of raw materials. Gabon (petroleum, wood), Ivory Coast (coffee, cacao) or Niger (uranium), as well as Senegal or Benin, which have no viable industries, are totally vulnerable to such manipulations.

The Ivory Coast case is particularly instructive. This land, the world's premier producer of cacao and number five for coffee, depends for 60% of its export revenues on these two products.

The price of cacao on the world markets has fallen about 40% since the beginning of 1988. Today, because of this drop, the foreign debt of Ivory Coast has reached $14 billion; their Farm Products Stabilization Bank is bankrupt, and therefore incapable of keeping its agreements with the cargo carriers; and 700,000 planters of cacao are ruined: They have seen their guaranteed prices go from $70 to $35 per kilo in under one year.

The same goes for coffee. The prices have fallen by about 50% and the international coffee accord guaranteeing a floor price, went up in smoke.

The multinationals' action can be easily traced. They pull prices downward by controlling the futures markets or by playing the producers off against each other. For cacao, for example, the production of Malaysia, fourth producer in the world, was played off against that of Ivory Coast; for coffee, the arabica producers of Central America have been set up against the Ivory Coast or Cameroon producers, which grow robusta.

President Houphouët-Boigny has tried everything to try to jam the spokes of the conspiracy to lower the world cacao price. In July 1987, he refused to sell his cacao below a profitable price ($209 per quintal). He stockpiled beans in warehouses, but the prices are still tumbling—international business promotes Malaysian cacao and sells it on the futures markets.

Caught in the pincers, Houphouët-Boigny tried to "turn" his enemy by signing bilateral accords. In December 1988, he sold 400,000 tons of Ivory Coast beans to the French company Sucres et Denrées. He also signed a contract for 500,000 tons with the American firm Phibro.

But this failed, too. Sucres et Denrées offered him a sharply lower price, despite a $70 million loan from the French Central Bank for Economic Cooperation, which allowed it to save appearances while the negotiations were going on, and Phibro broke its contract, considering the price not low enough!

Pushed by the new slave traders, the world price continues to drop, and the CFA ("African franc") price of ready-to-ship cacao is quite a lot higher than the market price. The ensuing bankruptcy of the Ivory Coast's Farm Products Stabilization Bank is upsetting the Central Bank of West African States (BCEAO), which extends the rural start-up credits to local financial establishments.

So the Ivory Coast government is on its knees. The World Bank and the IMF are imposing, as the condition for offering new loans and rescheduling the old ones—without which the country will go bankrupt—a brutal reduction in price supports to planters. Abidjan must also agree to give up certain export taxes.

The IMF and World Bank thus ratify the victory of the dealer—who buys at the cheapest rate, even though the final price to the Western consumer of chocolate does not vary—by making the costs of the operation be paid by the government of Ivory Coast (loss of export revenues and tariffs) and the peasant producer.

One can well understand the anger and sadness of Houphouët-Boigny, whose entire political career was built up with the planters' support, from the "radical" period down to the present. Likewise, President Bongo in Gabon finds himself forced to act against his traditional political base.

The era of compromise has ended

It is evident that a policy of compromise cannot continue, without endangering the very fabric of the states and the inhabitants who people them. We find ourselves "at the bottom of the barrel."

The problem is not just one for the African countries. Today, it is located principally in the attitude of the European countries, which continue, in fact, to follow IMF policies, the policies of ruin for Africa, criminal policies in the true sense of the word.

Thus the European Community gives 2 billion ECUs (European Currency Units)—a sum which is anyway a drop in the bucket compared to the challenge—to the 30 African countries, out of 47, which subscribe to the IMF's austerity programs. About 1 billion ECUs will be allotted for measures of "social accompaniment" of the draconian restructuring plans which will be put into effect (severance pay for fired civil servants, setting up of social programs, actions to recycle and retrain personnel, management of imports of basic foodstuffs. . .). In a word, as in the worst colonialist traditions, the European Community Brussels is playing Lady-Do-Rightly charity games . . . after having let the slavetrader in the door!

Most worrisome is that Benin is mentioned as an example, a test case. This country was ruined by a regime whose Marxist-Leninist label was just a cover for wheeling and dealing, incompetence, and embezzlement. Now its leader, Mathieu Kérékou, remains in place despite demonstrations demanding that he leave. Simply, this "Marxist" prime minister is being replaced by an expert "economist" from the World Bank, Nicéphore Soglo. Malicious tongues even say that a "red" mullah has been replaced by a "liberal" mullah—a businessman who is particularly cruel and unscrupulous.

To apply what policy? A terrible "stripping" of public spending: less education, less public health, and the firing of a good half of the civil service!

The regime's parasites certainly ought to be rapidly discarded. But most of them remain where they were, at the top! It is the vast patronage structure that was shown the door, with no new jobs, no plan, no investments to allow the fabric of the country to be reconstituted. The European Community countries—especially France—are disinvesting, and the EC funds are for "social expenditures" or monies to pay off the debt, not investments to increase wealth.

The lowered standard of living, of life expectancy, of food consumption, and of health and education, will continue—in one of the countries most ravaged by epidemic disease and malnutrition!

On a scale still more monstrous, Benin will thus get the Poland treatment: It will leave "Marxism" to pass through "liberal" austerity—or, pure and simple looting.

That is what is intolerable! That is the real problem, not some vague demand for "democracy."

Sure, these countries should be democratized, in the sense that a new elite comes to power, whose basis of competence is broader. However, what good will "democratization" be if a serious program of economic development is not put into place? By what miracle will "democratization" and the pillage of the resources be compatible? By what miracle is "democratization" born out of spreading poverty?

In fact, the European countries, with France in the lead, should radically change policy vis-à-vis Africa, rebuilding the basis of development, solid industrial bases, and not bases depending on an economy founded only on raw materials, with new African elites.

You cannot pretend to change things with the IMF, nor believe that it is sufficient to say "it's the IMF's fault" so that everything will miraculously arrange itself.

Finally, you need a serious, integrated development program, centered around great development projects—like the Schiller Institute's project for revitalizing Lake Chad and exploiting the very fertile lands around it—with the support of small and medium-size industry which can be productive because the conditions of production are created around it. At that point the students, future doctors, teachers, engineers, and technicians, can participate in a national and regional project, and thus concretely build up "democracy," anchoring it to the truth of economic growth, and not to "Marxist" illusions or "liberal" ones, to rhetoric which hides nepotism, wheeling and dealing, and graft.