

# The hoax of democracy in Africa

by Lawrence Eyong-Echaw

The crumbling of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the radical changes that followed in eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, created a groundswell of euphoria and hope for democracy in Africa. This "Eastern Spring" seemed to blossom in Africa with the unexpected release of Nelson Mandela after 27 years in jail, in February 1990. Suddenly, a contagious, convulsive, and unstoppable urge for freedom seemed to spring out of the oppressed peoples of Africa. Political parties were launched in defiance of the oppressive machinery of Africa's authoritarian regimes. All over the continent, students, workers, human rights groups, legal associations, and women's organizations were clamoring for multiparty democracy, the rule of law, freedom of speech, freedom of association, and the holding of democratic elections. Before long, even the most repressive dictators, such as Mobutu of Zaire, Eyadema of Togo, Mathieu Kerekou of Benin, Daniel arap Moi of Kenya, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia, Paul Biya of Cameroon, and Omar Bongo of Gabon, seemed to be giving in to pressure from the streets, for the introduction of democracy.

Political parties were mushrooming. Most of them were ethnically based without any real ideology or alternative development program. The parties lacked a pan-African vision and hardly coordinated their efforts, although they were fighting the same neo-colonial dictatorships. Most of the opposition leaders were former barons of the monolithic system who had fallen into disfavor and were anxious to get back into power in the next election. When snap presidential elections were called, the fragmentary opposition, in its inherently egoistic attitude, could not agree on a single candidate who would mobilize the population and beat the incumbent dictator.

The principles of accountability and financial transparency which have been so lacking in the governance of the corrupt monolithic systems are equally flaunted by opposition leaders in their management of party funds. Elected officials are regularly sidelined in favor of ethnically inspired clientelism.

In most opposition parties, the feudalism of the tribe has been transferred to the party apparatus, with the tendency to appoint the faithfuls and sycophants of the "prince" to the rejection of elections.

Western political leaders and their financial institutions pretended to genuinely be encouraging the democratization

process, by deceptive pronouncements. In April 1990, then-U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Herman Cohen announced that in addition to previous requirements on economic policy reform and human rights, democratization would be a third condition for U.S. assistance. On May 8, 1990, the U.S. ambassador to Kenya stated that "there is a tide flowing in our Congress, which controls the purse strings, to concentrate economic assistance to those of the world's nations that nourish democratic institutions, defend human rights, and practice multiparty politics." Speaking at a meeting of the Overseas Development Council in June 1990, British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd said that "Britain's assistance will favor countries tending toward pluralism, public accountability, respect for the rule of law, human rights, and market principles." President François Mitterrand, addressing a French-African conference at La Baule in June 1990, stated that in the future, French aid would flow "more enthusiastically" to countries moving toward democracy. Four years after, these lofty declarations have proved to be equally hypocritical. In fact, the so-called project democracy of these imperialist nations was intended to reinforce these dictatorships on condition that they accept the peonage conditions of the Anglo-American and French money mandarins, which have aggravated the pauperization of the people of Africa.

## The bankers' hoax

In order to accelerate the disintegration of the fragile African nation-states, the financial police institutions of the great banking interests, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, foisted their adjustment policies on desperate African dictators tenaciously clinging to power. These dictators, who were evidently under duress, accepted cutting government spending, removing subsidies, freezing wages, sacking civil servants, and selling government-owned companies, thereby liquidating the state, and causing despair, widespread malnutrition, civil wars, and premature death—in exchange for staying in power. It is, therefore, not surprising that, despite the clamors of the western press for democracy in Africa, they have only succeeded in imposing IMF/World Bank free market policies.

What finally shut out the faintest glimmer of hope for democratization, were the so-called opposition political parties and their elitist leaders. First of all, the parochial ethnocentric power bases that they controlled created deep fissures in the dispossessed rural masses and unemployed urban slum dwellers who made up their electorate. The dictators capitalized on this weakness and legalized a plethora of small inconsequential parties which could not make any real national appeal. Mobutu legalized 144 parties in 1990, Biya of Cameroon legalized 103, Bongo of Gabon (with 1 million people) created about 50. Eyadema of Togo created about 10, arap Moi of Kenya allowed the creation of about half a dozen. In Niger, Somalia, Algeria, the Ivory Coast, Mozambique,

Angola, Congo, São Tomé and Príncipe, Sudan, Sierra Leone, and Ethiopia, the trend was identical.

The manifest hypocrisy of these amateur opposition leaders was evident, when they generally tended to endorse the prescriptions of the Bretton Woods institutions, out of political expediency, even though they were pertinently aware that such policies were responsible for the unremitting misery of their people and the destruction of the nation-state, through the politicization of ethnicity.

It became customary for opposition leaders to regularly take advice and even instructions from the U.S., French, British, and other ambassadors of western countries. With the built-in suspicion that grows out of a situation of ethnic politics, the government, with loans provided by the IMF, accelerated the campaign of corrupting opposition leaders with huge bribes and positions in government. Since these proponents of cosmetic change had no alternative development programs to solve the grave unemployment, lack of infrastructure, pandemic diseases, and illiteracy which is plaguing the people, their advocacy of democracy ended with the satisfaction of their egoistic material needs.

Further, just as in the days of Katangese traitor Moïse Tshombe in the 1960s, multinational interests coax, cajole, manipulate, and pit one opposition leader against another. In French Africa, the Bretton Woods institutions influenced the departure of what they regarded as the pro-Marxist regimes of Mathieu Kérékou of Benin and Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo, so as to foist market economic policies on these countries, in the name of democracy. The dictatorships of Eyadéma in Togo, Biya in Cameroon, Bongo in Gabon, Mobutu in Zaire, Lansana Kote in Guinea, and the late Houphouët-Boigny of Ivory Coast, are being sustained by French multinational interests, despite their gross human rights abuses, repression, and economic failures. They have remained in power, although they were severely beaten in elections. In Gabon, the French had to intervene energetically in 1990 to prevent the ouster of Omar Bongo by a popular insurrection. In the Maghreb, the rejection of dialogue and power-sharing with the extremely popular Islamic groups has radicalized them and unleashed a campaign of violence on the whole region.

### **The negative role of the army**

The armies of African nation-states have often not functioned for national interests either. Recruited on an ethnic basis with the incumbent President's ethnic group dominating, the over-privileged and over-equipped "presidential guard" (which was always a veritable army within the national army), it became impossible for the army to serve as a neutral and impartial institution. Specially trained by the colonial power which controls the economic interests of the client-country, the army tended to be always at the service of the multinational interests in the metropole. At the height of the clamor for multipartism, Zaire's Mobutu used his pre-

dominantly "Ngbandi" presidential guard, Togo's Eyadéma used his northern troops, while Cameroon's Biya used his predominantly "Beti" guards to wage war on defenseless pro-democracy activists. These campaigns of organized terror with a tribal-based army always degenerates into civil war, extremes of which we have seen in Rwanda and Burundi. In Zaire, Togo, and Cameroon, the situation was very similar in 1991, when the dictators each used the army to break the "Ghost Town" operation launched by pro-democracy forces to paralyze the economy, render the country ungovernable, and oblige the dictators to introduce democratic reforms. But this "brinkmanship" by the opposition either degenerated into civil war (where the pro-democracy forces were armed with external support), or failed, because the strongman's tribal army crushed unarmed protesters. The very revealing four-year experience of pro-democracy struggles in Africa, have proved that the continent cannot become democratic because it is not yet economically independent. Where any cosmetic changes have occurred, as in Benin, Congo, Niger, and Zambia, this has been the will of the colonial powers.

### **Monetary colonialism**

With the implementation of IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programs which have resulted in Africa subsidizing North America and western Europe, the fate of Africa has been sealed. There is a net flow of about \$200 billion annually to the West in the form of debt repayment. To ensure the continuous flow of these resources, the IMF has imposed a pro-IMF bureaucracy. In Ivory Coast, the late Félix Houphouët-Boigny handed over his successor, Henri Konan Bédié, to former World Bank President Robert McNamara in the 1970s for grooming in the International Financial Corp. Recently, the IMF has reintegrated former Ivoirian Prime Minister Alassan Ouattara as a senior adviser to IMF Managing Director Michel Camdessus, to monitor the policies of French African countries which have recently suffered a 50% devaluation imposed by the IMF. The IMF is promoting deindustrialization and making sure that Africa does not generate the energy capacity that would enable it to attain technological independence. The local dictators and their IMF-imposed finance ministers are forcing Africa to persist exclusively in its production and export of primary products whose prices are determined in the New York and London money markets where prices are perennially depreciated. Such organized stagnation, which generates unemployment, illiteracy, disease, and poverty, is the most propitious scenario for barbarism and civil war.

Democracy will therefore remain a hoax in Africa, until the continent musters the courage to wrench itself out of the IMF logic of zero development and zero population growth, which has transformed the continent into a haven for Anglo-American and French financial speculation, with the blessing of gun-toting dictators who look on with scorn at the agony of their people.