

## DEMOCRACY AND AFRICA—a Discussion

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*With this and the following stimulating articles we launch a new discussion series on the above theme. Readers are invited to send in their own views for publication.*

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### AFRICA AND PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY

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MANY FOREIGN OBSERVERS of the African political scene have expressed anxiety as to the future of parliamentary democracy in the newly-independent states, and in particular over the trend towards the one-party state which is often considered to be the death-knell of democracy.

What is democracy, anyway?

The rule of the majority alone is not democracy, nor is the two-party system which has taken root in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and which reflects the struggle between the wealthy and privileged classes and the masses who, under middle-class leadership, have come to challenge them.

It must be admitted that, in the words of Thomas Franck, democracy cannot be measured necessarily 'in terms of numbers of voters nor by the frequency with which they are consulted, nor even by the accuracy with which votes cast are reflected in the relative strength of each political party.' Thus, for instance, it cannot be said that Georgia and Kentucky, which alone among the fifty states of the American Union permit 18-year-olds to vote, are the most democratic states. Nor can it be said that government by referendum (General De Gaulle's French recipe) is more democratic than government by representatives. It is far from clear, too, that Northern Nigeria under its feudal leadership is more 'democratic' with its multi-party system,

than Guinea, with its socialist-inclined one-party system. Further, what shall we say about situations such as occurred in the United Kingdom in 1929 and 1951, in Canada in 1926, in South Africa in 1948, in Australia in 1954, and in Nigeria in 1959, where the ruling party in each case was elected by a minority of voters?

Critics of the one-party system seem to assume that the only freedom that matters is the freedom to have more than one party. But—as the United Nations Secretary-General U Thant told a British audience in 1962—‘The notion that democracy requires the existence of an organized opposition to the government of the day is not valid. Democracy only requires freedom for opposition, not necessarily its organized existence.’

Granted the necessity for political parties for the proper functioning of democracy, this does not oblige one to accept the two-party system (such as the British Labour/Conservative or the U.S. Democratic/Republican formation) whose virtues have really been overrated. As an English prime minister once pointed out, the two-party system is all right ‘so long as there is no fundamental difference of opinion between the two parties,’ such as divides the Communists from the Conservatives. Any such difference is bound to lead, in time, to a revolution in which the weaker party will be suppressed or absorbed by the stronger.

Strictly speaking, the old parliamentary democracy as it is known in the ‘Western’ world is an elaborate make-believe in which politicians, seeming enemies, play a profitable game together. With the bureaucrats, they run the state, subject to the powerful influence of sinister vested interests. This parliamentary democracy, with its rituals and hypocritical routine, is often too slow for the times, and too divorced from the seat of actual power to be effective in solving the vital problems of the common people. As Nehru observed, the failing of parliamentary democracy ‘is not that it has gone too far, but that it did not go far enough. It was not democratic enough, because it did not provide for economic democracy and its methods were too slow and cumbrous and unsuited to a period of rapid change.’

The right to vote, and equality before the law, in the old democracy, is mainly theoretical. In the absence of equal opportunity for all, it is those who own and control the means of production and the organs of public opinion—the factory owners, landlords, press barons and the like, the people who have reaped the benefits of good education and have the passports to good society and good employment in state and industry—it is these who ultimately rule society. It is not comforting to the ordinary man to know that he is hypothetically free to dine every night at the Hotel Olympic or to fly first class in the French



Airlines, to hire eminent lawyers to defend him when in trouble, or to run for the highest office in the state, when in fact he cannot afford these exquisite things. When Parliament debates or legislates on reforms, but leaves the instruments of reform in private hands, or when it makes the public representative the scapegoat for the bandits of finance and industry over whose actions he is denied effective control (which in effect makes Parliament itself the professional public mourner for private economic crimes) parliamentary democracy is discredited. As the late Aneurin Bevan declared, this is a division of labour ultimately fatal to representative democratic government, since it divorces parliamentary discussion from action, and thus brings discussion itself into contempt. This paves the way psychologically for fascism.

Contemporary African leaders like Gamal Abdel Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Sékou Touré and Ahmed Ben Bella have stated their preference for the one-party system rather than the multi-party system handed down to them by their predecessors. As the Ghana Convention People's Party Manifesto (1962) put it, the one-party system provides 'the best answer for government in Africa' since the newly-independent African states are in a situation 'almost analogous to a state of war and national emergency' which in all countries requires a 'national' government. Moreover, continued the Manifesto, a multi-party system is 'entirely alien to the traditional concept of Government in the African state' and encourages both intrigues from outside and corruption inside a newly-independent country. Accepting these arguments, President Nyerere of Tanganyika added afterwards that the struggle for independence and national reconstruction is a patriotic task which leaves little room for differences and needs a maximum united effort by the whole people to eradicate poverty, ignorance and disease—a national emergency that calls for the union of parties and talents for the most effective mobilization of national resources.

No doubt, the method of bringing about the united party is important. A democrat will naturally prefer unity by agreement to unity by coercion, even if the latter is camouflaged by legal niceties.

The squeamish democrat may shudder at the mere mention of a one-party system, which calls up in his imagination the suppression of civil liberties and oppositional elements, concentration camps and censorship, security police and thought-control through the school, wireless, cinema, press and platform, and the like. But the truth is that these things are done to a greater or lesser degree in the so-called democratic states. The difference (and perhaps the real cause of complaint) is that in these states it is the progressives who suffer from such disabilities, whereas in the leftist totalitarian states it is the reaction-

aries, who prove themselves incorrigibly wedded to outmoded customs and exploitation of their fellow-men, that are suppressed. In any case, the abolition of class and racial discrimination, of backwardness and exploitation—the *raison d'être* of the revolutionary one-party system—are goals far greater than the temporary sacrifices necessary to realize them. Inhibitions on personal freedom are bound to pass away with the conditions that brought them into being, as we are seeing today in the case of the U.S.S.R. and other socialist states where the growth of prosperity is giving rise to more democratization and devolution of powers in the state.

Africa's desire for unity has been described as 'pathological'—but the argument for a united party is no less cogent for this reason. Addressing a Paris audience in February, 1960, the Mali Minister of the Interior, M. Madeira Keita, claimed that 'the most stable governments (in Africa) were those constituted by a single party'. He added that 'while elections served to divide Africans, they also served to attenuate the awakening of national consciousness among the masses' because of the tendency of leaders 'to play up regionalism . . . and internal racism.' It must be admitted that the nihilism and intrigue with foreign powers often indulged in by opposition parties, or the colossal bribery and gerrymandering and the breaking of heads that have featured in many parliamentary elections in the newly-independent states, do not highly recommend the multi-party system for these countries. Nor do the familiar pattern of intimidation, victimization or discrimination in offices or villages by supporters of a ruling party, often including police and other personnel who are supposed to be impartial.

To quote Mr. Keita again: 'It is true that we played the game (of electioneering) for a long time, but on comparing programmes, on comparing congress resolutions, you could feel our agreement on every point. And yet we fought each other tooth and nail, passionately and furiously—only the word "passion" can express to the Africans, to the people of the land of sunshine, all the violence of our fights and our oppositions . . . . It is thus that the (African) countries have moved progressively towards the formula of a united party.' The significant exceptions are Ghana and Sierra Leone, but even in Nigeria three of the Regions are vitually governed by a one-party system, while state power has relentlessly been used in other regions to crush the opposition, as has happened in Ghana, Liberia, Morocco, Niger, Cameroun, Congo (Leopoldville) and elsewhere.

An honest critic is bound to admit that the authoritarian trends—political control of the police, judiciary and civil service, suppression of the opposition, personal bodyguard and personality cult—in the



leadership of many new countries have deep roots in the earlier colonial regimes that mercilessly clamped down on their opponents, the nationalists, and relied mainly on violence and coercion to maintain themselves amid a hostile environment. Most countries in the world have passed through that phase. Beatrice Webb, the eminent British Fabian socialist, and co-author with her equally famous husband, Sidney Webb of the study *Soviet Communism a New Civilization*, expressed in 1942 the considered judgment on this subject as follows:

A study of the facts suggests that when a revolutionary government is confronted with the task of educating a mass of illiterate and oppressed peoples, of diverse races and religions, among them primitive tribes, not only to higher levels of health and culture, but also in the art of self-government, there is no alternative to the one-party system with its refusal to permit organized political opposition to the new political and economic order.'

The experience of many countries goes to vindicate Mrs. Webb's theory. One may instance the history of Turkey under Ataturk, Egypt under Nasser, Burma under Ne Win or Cuba, in each of which a one-party system has, in a short time, brought about more all-round progress to the people and invested the nation with greater dignity and self-awareness than the corrupt, inefficient, fratricidal multi-party system of earlier regimes.

Politics is often too much 'personalised' in the new countries of Asia and Africa, with excessive hero-worship and myth-making as the consequence. The first step towards military rule in Pakistan was the split in the ruling Moslem League caused by the dismissal of Nazimuddin in 1953; similarly the conflict of the two major parties in Sudan—with the usual accompaniment of charges of intrigue and corruption—was one of the causes of military rule in Sudan. In 1962, the expulsion of the Western Nigerian premier Akintola by his party, the Action Group, led to the downfall of the party government there. Such routine drastic changes in the form of government do not automatically follow changes in leadership personnel in the older countries, with their long tradition of rule and hierarchic succession, their 'cultured' apathy and mistrust of politicians' promises. Ministers are dismissed and new men appointed without precipitating a major crisis. But one should not overstate the stability and smooth course of parliamentary rule in the 'Western' countries. All have known their interludes of assassinations, military rule and civil war.

The multi-party system failed woefully to stem the tide of fascism between the two world wars, in Italy, Portugal, Spain, Poland, Greece, Austria, Germany and France. Within the last decade, the sterility of this system contributed to the overthrow of parliamentary demo-

cracy by military dictatorships in Pakistan, Sudan, Togo, Iraq, Burma and much of Latin America. It is beside the point to say that democracy has not even been tried in these places. Some of them have been practising parliamentary democracy for 800 years; in the U.S.A. and Brazil, where it has been tried for 200 years, murder and violence are still used as a means of changing governments—just as in some Afro-Asian countries which are new to its elaborate rites.

The African concept of democracy is in many ways similar to that of the ancient Greeks, from whose language the word originated. To them it meant 'government by discussion among equals.' Under the traditional African system, decisions were reached by a consensus rather than by votes and, as someone said of Malawi, 'The elders sit under a big tree and talk until they agree.' Representation was often rotational, and division of labour as between villages and age-groups for instance, was extensively practised. No one who carried out his or her civic duties was excluded from the management of public affairs. Basically, democracy is government by discussion and participation, rather than by force; the concern of each for all and all for each; the common sharing of rights and responsibilities. No doubt, the complexities of modern life demand something more than the simple, direct democracy of the ancient city-state, and we may agree that, whatever the vagaries of popular government today, the counting of heads is a practical solution for which we have not yet devised a better substitute. No conception of democracy will be complete, however, without a guarantee of civil liberties for all, which we can define as the freedom to think, act or speak as one likes without injuring another, the freedom from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, the right to vote, and equal opportunity for all.

These rights once guaranteed, the institutional structures of democracy are not as important as its content. Should there be one legislative chamber or two? A Presidential or Parliamentary constitution? Should there be constitutional safeguards for minority rights—language-rights (as in India, Canada, U.S.S.R. or China) or rights to land and a share in government jobs (as in Malaya, Cyprus and some Latin American States)? Should fundamental human rights and regional devolution of authority be embodied in the Constitution? These questions are less important than the growth of the feeling of equality and responsibility for the public welfare which will ensure the management of public affairs in accordance with the will of the masses. Only a long tradition of common struggle fosters this feeling of equality and common concern for the public weal.

Let me conclude this brief analysis by saying that, while it is possible to distinguish certain broad principles of democracy, no one country

can rightly claim to have the last word on its forms and possible lines of development. Political systems are determined not so much by men's minds as by the conditions of their living. In many countries, the improvement in workers' conditions of living has, ironically, chilled their revolutionary ardour, just as the imperatives of socio-economic development have created the impatient revolutionary regimes in many new countries of Asia and Africa. Many Afro-Asian countries have built-in checks—religious sanctions and social customs, mass organisations such as trade unions and communal unions, and others—to arrest any trend towards personal dictatorship for selfish ends. In spite of the myth-making powers and huge machinery of coercion at the disposal of the modern state, revolution remains the ultimate court of appeal for any oppressed people. This is the guarantee that, sooner or later, they will get the government they deserve.