

New wind of change blowing in Africa

A new liberation movement against undemocratic, unsuccessful and unpopular governments is under way in Africa, says a well-known political analyst. Shauna Westcott examines an article in the Washington Quarterly by Colin Legum.

FOUR decades after the anti-colonial storm began to sweep foreign rule from the continent, Africa stands poised for a second period of liberation. The targets of the new wind of change are "unpopular, unsuccessful and undemocratic governments".

Five developments are cited in support of this assertion, argued in an article titled "The Coming of Africa's Second Independence" by political analyst Colin Legum, and published in the Winter 1990 edition of *The Washington Quarterly*.

They are: the breakdown of political and economic institutions, the growing number of countries abandoning the experiment in one-party states, the establishment of centres for the promotion of pluralist political systems in the continent, a "growing chorus of outspoken dissent", and the spread of an African human rights movement.

Legum notes that over the last three years, the number of African countries with a multi-party political system has increased from six – Botswana, Gambia, Djiboutie, Mauritius, Tunisia and (arguably) Morocco – to eight, with a ninth, Nigeria, set to return to parliamentary government in 1992.

The two new recruits to the multi-party system are Senegal and Algeria, with the latter particularly significant in Legum's view because dissent was rigorously repressed by the single-party government formed in 1962 after a long and bitter independence struggle. When repression was lifted, formerly clandestine resistance surfaced in 20 political parties.

"Senegal, which had a brief flirtation with single-party rule, now displays a vibrant open political system with no fewer than 17 competing parties (seven of them Marxist factions). This new system already has stood the test of two elections," Legum says.

He concedes that some countries with one-party rule, like Tanzania, "provide for a reasonable level of genuine democratic participation in the election and deselection of members of parliament".

He concedes also that the collapse of liberation movement coalitions with the departure of the common enemy and the ensuing danger of ethnic or regional conflict, civil war and partition, were factors making a widespread choice of single-party rule

"understandable".

But, he says, in many cases the choice was made "not because of any serious danger to the state, but simply in order to entrench the power of a particular ruling group".

Thirty years on, the two major arguments advanced in support of single-party rule – that it was the most effective means of containing the conflicts and integrating the interests of plural societies, and that it offered the quickest way to promote balanced economic development – are revealed as seriously flawed.

"There is no evidence," says Legum, "that the half-dozen African states that have re-

ness, nepotism and corruption" that seem to flourish in the absence of democratic space and procedures.

Legum acknowledges that political systems alone cannot be blamed for the "grave decline in most African countries", citing as contributory factors an inequitable world trading system, quadrupling of oil and fertilizer prices, drought, locust plagues and climatic conditions.

But he argues that the consequences of these "negative factors" would have been less severe had state bureaucracies been responsive to popular opinion, especially from the peasantry that constitutes over 70 per cent of the population of most sub-Saharan



SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE: Robert Mugabe's plan to turn Zimbabwe into a one-party state seems to contradict a new trend in African politics.

tained multi-party political systems have fared worse in the promotion of national unity or economic development than those governed by a single ruling party.

"Botswana with its nine ethnic groups and Mauritius with its dynamic heterogeneous society are, in many respects, prospering more than most other countries. The experience of other countries has been like that of Kenya, which today is more ethnically divided than before the government of President Daniel Arap Moi turned the country into a single-party state."

The failure of one-party systems to build unity is matched by their failure on the economic front, a consequence of the "slack-

countries.

"Ethiopia, to cite but one example, is in desperate economic straits not just because of drought and eroded land, but because a tiny elite of soldiers and intellectuals have remained determined to nail down an unpopular Marxist system on an unwilling population," he says.

Noting that the vogue is passing for dismissing partisans of democratic practice as slavish imitators of the West, Legum points to Senegal's Centre for the Study of Research of Pluralistic Democracy in the Third World as an example of a new trend.

The president of the centre, Professor Jacques Nzouankeu, has spoken of an "atlas of

COMMITTED TO A MULTI-PARTY DEMOCRACY:

The new president of Namibia, Sam Nujoma, swears in Hein Geingob as prime minister at the independence celebrations in March this year

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democracies" beginning to spread across the continent. Citing recent elections in half a dozen countries, he observed: "In every case, democratic principles were put to the test and in every case those countries showed that they are moving away from authoritarianism and towards greater democracy."

A similar centre, the African Leadership Forum, has been established by the former Nigerian head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo. Its aim is to prepare African leaders for the "profound changes" necessary to stop the continental drift into escalating poverty, and to correct "our false political start".

The problems facing Africa, in the general's view, "stem from a human failure to establish institutions that make for a human society". He emphasises that "only we ourselves know what is really amiss with us and only we Africans can tell it like it is to ourselves".

LEGUM argues that the movement towards democracy is fueled by the "increasingly outspoken dissent" of academics, journalists and politicians - including some formerly prominent in single-party systems.

Among those he names are Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, former Organisation of African Unity secretary-general Edem Kodjo and a dozen African academics who recently produced a book on Democratic Theory and Practice in Africa (see Book Review) which condemns one-party states as "not only sensitive and insecure, but also very oppressive and unresponsive to the demands of the mass of people whom they rule".

Another current in the democratic tide is a growing campaign in the Third World for human rights. Ratification of the Charter of Human and People's Rights by over two-thirds of the 51 members of the OAU is evidence, as is the establishment by the OAU of the African Commission for Human and People's Rights.

Legum acknowledges that the possibility of new tyrannies in the mould of Idi Amin's Uganda cannot be ruled out. But he argues that the African silence that shrouded the misdeeds of such despots is "much less likely to occur in the future". At the same time, however, he is uneasy about the fact that criticism of Gaddafi (Libya), Mengistu (Ethiopia) and Mobuto (Zaire) "remains

muted".

Legum notes that "many, if not all the nastier regimes were able to survive in Africa because of their client relationship with some of the major powers".

"The Americans have supported and continue to support Mobuto's regime in Zaire and, formerly, President Jaafar al-Nimeiri's in Sudan. The Soviets supplied arms to Amin and give strong support to the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia. The British provide substantial aid to Moi in Kenya. The French encouraged and supported Bokassa until nearly the end."

He expresses the hope that the major powers will in future "withhold support from crass offenders or, at least, speak out against them". But he adds that African democrats perceive the new thrust of Western pressure to be "exporting the idea that capitalism is the answer to the continent's problems".

Legum notes that new tensions are likely to be produced among Africans as a result of this kind of pressure and asserts: "What African democrats are seeking is both freedom from their own unrepresentative gov-

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ernments and freedom from foreign economic dictates."

He argues that "undiluted capitalism" has little support in Africa and that communism is "no longer a lodestar" - except in South Africa, where "apartheid is understandably linked to capitalism", and the bitterness of the anti-apartheid struggle has "bred a new generation of younger black leaders who see a Marxist state as the only way of transforming the country's inequitable political and economic system".

However, Legum argues that the rigor mortis of Eastern European communism and the consequences of Gorbachev's perestroika cannot fail to affect the evolution of

political life on the continent, even in South Africa.

Among other developments which could check progress towards democratic practice in Africa is what Legum calls "the Islamic factor".

"Whereas frustration and disillusionment in sub-Saharan Africa have led to an awakening of interest in the alternative of multi-party parliamentary government, in countries with strong Islamic ties (Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and (arguably) Morocco, as well as Egypt, Sudan, and, more marginally, Somalia), such frustrations and disillusionment have produced a reaction favouring religious fundamentalism," he says.

Nevertheless, he avers that "the current dominant trend strongly favours the seeding of democratic ideas", giving the all but last word to Ghanaian journalist Baffour Ankomah, who wrote after the Tiananmen Square fiasco:

"The ignorance of the Chinese people about politics made it possible for the dictators to hold power so tightly for so long. It used to be so in Africa, today it is all changing."

"Like Chinese students, Africans are now a widely travelled people and can compare the differences between countries. They know we have chains to break at home, and are angry."

"The fact that so few African leaders have condemned the killings in China shows how guilty they feel about repression at home."

"But, thank God, Africa has precedents and time on its side. We can begin, today, to reform our political systems, to do away with the 'culture of silence', to restore basic personal freedoms to our people - before the bubble finally bursts."

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