

BY MOIRA LEVY

Liberation No 2: what difference to the poor?

A multi-party democracy without a strong civil society could amount to little more than a restructuring of the political elite. Africa learned this the hard way, according to a paper presented at a recent conference in Senegal.

AFRICA'S current 'democratic revolution', in which former one-party states are holding – or at least announcing their intention to hold – multi-party democratic elections, represents a political shift of some significance. International observers, funders in particular, have welcomed these moves with some relief, as signs of a process of reform which, if it achieves nothing else, will at least legitimise the continuation of their funding efforts.

However, for those on the ground, many of them rural peasants, the democratisation process represents not a turning point, but a logical and inevitable continuation of the decades of underdevelopment.

Their experience is being compared to the earliest period of post-colonial rule, replete as it was with broken promises and unfulfilled expectations. After multi-party elections in Kenya, Angola, Zambia, Cameroon, ordinary people, particularly rural peasants, are finding themselves in much the same position as before, facing top-down democratic drives which have much to do with securing old or alternative power elites, but little to do with land redistribution or social reform.

Their experience is summed up by Ethiopian professor Fantu Cheru, an economist based at the American University, in his phrase 'participation without empowerment'.

In a paper presented to a conference on civil society and democratic theory, held at the Gorée Institute, Senegal, he argued that the current campaign for multi-party reform in its present form is unlikely to bring substantial economic and political changes to the daily lives of the majority of people on the African continent.

Just like the struggle for independence that preceded it, the democratisation movement amounts to mobilising people of diverse class, social and political backgrounds under the leadership of an African middle-class elite. Also in common with the 'first liberation' of the 1960s is a tendency to emphasise struggle at the level of constitutional reform, where the focus is on vote-catching and building power bases, and to ignore civil society where ordinary people can be mobilised around issues that dominate their lives.

There exists widespread fear that the second liberation might turn out to be just as

disappointing as the first, and that the new democrats might turn their backs on the masses much the same way the leaders of the independence struggle had done.'

The lessons for South Africa ring out. Although Fantu's concern is with the peasantry who make up the bulk of the population of countries further north, his observations can be applied to South Africa on the eve of our first one-person-one-vote election.

He cites two truisms about multi-party democracy. Firstly, participation cannot be ordered from above but must be demanded and carried out from below and, secondly, democracy cannot succeed in conditions of absolute poverty. He lists the servicing of basic needs and providing of education as two prerequisites for its success.

'The central themes of the democracy debate have primarily focused on multi-party systems and on universal suffrage. The discussion involves very little treatment of how one goes about creating an "enabling" environment to sustain democracy.

While multi-party elections and universal franchise are important formal criteria, they are by no means sufficient to judge the democratic qualities of a society. In impoverished societies such as ours, democracy requires a change in the balance of forces.

The pursuit of democracy in itself is good. But in the African context ... political freedom and participation cannot be divorced from other kinds of freedom. There is an organic link between political freedom and freedom from hunger, ignorance and disease. People must see the results of democracy in an improved standard of living, better education, better housing and access to health and food items.'

Fantu points to an irony behind the upswing of democratisation in Africa; the 'success' of the new wave of democratisation is built on the failure of development. The politicians of today, like the leaders of the independence struggles of the past, have been able to draw on the support of the poor majority to advance their social adjustment programmes. Yet these new social and economic programmes often impose renewed hardships on the poor and usually do not

deliver what they promised.

This in turn fires local resistance to new democratic regimes that fail to live up to expectations – creating a new source of democratisation.

Having been victims of mismanaged and undemocratic state-sponsored development, the

masses of ordinary poor are increasingly attempting to bypass formal agencies and link up with different kinds of non-governmental organisations at a local level.

Fantu gives as an example the powerful Greens movement in Kenya under Dr Wangari Maathai, and the efforts by Kenyan coffee, tea and sugar farmers to bypass the parastatal and other official buyers by neglecting these export crops in favour of food crops for local consumption.

By rediscovering their self-reliance, these peasants become politically conscious and educated at the local level as they create new avenues for political and social mobilisation.

In Fantu's words: 'The delegitimation of the state has also opened up considerable room for the elaboration of new civil-society relations.

'This terrain has increasingly been occupied by civic associations, women's groups, peasants' associations, environmental groups and human rights groups' – in other words alternatives to the political party systems.

Their strategies cover non-payment of taxes, peasant insurrection, urban riot – what Fantu calls demands on the state through 'the politics of claims'.

He warns that it is doubtful whether the leaders of multi-partyism in Africa recognise and understand the extent to which ordinary people are involved in the political struggle through un-ordinary, informal channels.

'Despite invoking the slogan of "popular participation" at every political rally, no clear directions are provided on how to involve grassroots organisations in a substantial way and to help them build local democratic capacities that will endure over time.'

His prophesy that such popular participation faces either being 'struck down or incorporated into centrally orchestrated organisation' sounds a lesson for South Africa. The future success of this country's democratisation efforts may well rest on how effectively these moves by the majority to bring about real change and accountable leadership are acknowledged, channelled and organised.

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