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Africa's leadership crises

Summary & Comment: African nations are unlikely to achieve economic growth without effective leaders and political stability. "Where did it all go wrong?" the author asks and answers, "We seem to have transferred patriarchal traditions, customs, and attitudes to our approach to leadership and business in the modern-day world." Progress starts with self-awareness and self-analyses, effective leaders, robust governance, infrastructure, reliable utilities supplies, security, efficient government protocols, and basic food and water for the poor. DN

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Primary Category: [Africa General](#)

Secondary Category: [Economic Justice](#)

Key Words: leadership, crises, governance, challenges,

Date Written: 30 June 2008

Document Origin: AfricaFiles

Source URL: <http://www.africafiles.org>

African Charter Article #20: All peoples shall have the right to existence and self determination and the right to free themselves from the bonds of domination. ([Click for full text...](#))

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Africa's leadership crises

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"You lost, Mugabe – so I'll be back". That was the headline in the *World News* section of *The Sunday Times* of 4th May. And the week before that the same section of the same newspaper carried a different headline on the on-going situation in Zimbabwe. In fact, over the last few months numerous newspapers and other news media have run articles on the leadership crises in Zimbabwe and Kenya.

It is good that such problems are highlighted by news media because they help to focus world attention on countries facing such issues, where international efforts may be needed to help alleviate the problems, the brunt of which are usually borne by the common people in those countries. However with several media stories of the simultaneously occurring leadership tussles in Kenya and Zimbabwe, I suspect that many people, especially in the developed world, may start to get a picture of African countries as places where we continuously have such power struggles that demonstrate our inability to govern ourselves properly.

This is not just exemplified by the recent events in Zimbabwe and Kenya. Prior to that we have had similar fiascos in other African countries including the last elections and ensuing violence in *Nigeria*; the political instability in *Chad*, *Sudan*, and *Somali*; and similar problems in *Ivory Coast*, *Togo*, and *Malawi* – all within the last ten or twenty years. And recently we witnessed the HIV virus almost decimate many eastern and southern African countries while their leaders lived in denial. Even today, after being forced to acknowledge the HIV problem by the sheer magnitude of infection, pervasive mismanagement continues to hinder adequate progress on stemming the spread of HIV in Africa.

With this catalogue of leadership and governance challenges continually besetting African countries, one can not help but wonder whether Africans are really incapable of self-governance or if something else is amiss. After all, many of the *newly industrialised countries* (NICs) across Latin America and Asia suffered decades of similar misrule and leadership strife before making the transition to political stability and economic growth. Even the developed nations of the West went through their own historical periods of turbulent political unrest, albeit ages ago.

There are two interesting points to note here

First, most other regions of the world went through their periods of political adolescence and then moved on to maturity, whereas in Africa we seem to be stuck in the same state of political development for so many decades post-colonisation. Second, right across the global landscape, leadership and political stability always precede economic prosperity. And no one will argue that economic growth is Africa's most-pressing need today. It seems obvious to me that we are unlikely to achieve this until we address the malaise of political instability across Africa, and we can not do this with ineffective leaders at the helm.

The relationship between leadership and an entity's ability to grow and succeed is not a novel concept, whether that entity is a small business enterprise, a multinational corporation or a nation-state. We see evidence of this frequently at both micro and macro levels all over the world, from Louis V. Gerstner's leadership of IBM's turnaround in the early 1990s to Prince Rainier III's stewardship of Monaco's development as a successful commercial centre and international tourist attraction. So, if different entities further their growth and success through effective leadership, what's happening in Africa? Why are we constantly grappling with leadership tussles that usually engender violence and wanton destruction?

The answer may not be straightforward but it certainly does seem that disingenuous, African leaders repeatedly find ways to push their own selfish agendas at the cost of the mass populace and the economic development of their nations. Time and time again we see African leaders come to power with promises of improving the lives of their people. And time and time again we see no real results, only evidence of corruption and embezzlement, economic mismanagement and worsening poverty for the common man in Africa. It is shameful that in many African countries today, our infrastructure is worse than it was just after independence and per capita income is also lower.

In fact, in many parts of Africa we have not had leaders who truly hold the interests of their countries at heart since the first generation of indigenous leaders like *Jomo Kenyatta*, *Kwame Nkrumah*, *Julius Nyerere*, and *Kenneth Kaunda*. Despite their shortcomings in government, this first crop of African leaders not only fought for independence but also made significant efforts to improve the lives of their country's population. Interestingly, this may be a common thread running through the leadership crises across Africa: as newly independent nations we had leaders who truly wanted to further Africa's cause, yet today Africa is overrun by despots, illiterates, and incompetents masquerading as heads of states. So where did it all go wrong?

One pointer may be that many African nations are really amalgamations of different ethnic groups forced together by colonial governments into the national entities we recognise today. Perhaps in the absence of the colonial masters these erstwhile disparate groups are just not governable as a collective. This is important because in many other areas of the world where colonial masters created nation-states from their erstwhile colonies, their subsequent exits after independence left ethnic or religious tensions, violence, and outright war in some cases. The partition of India and Pakistan is a case in point.

But is Africa's colonial history to blame for our leadership and governance problems? I think not, because many other ex-colonies have shed the shackles of their colonial past to evolve as political, economic and commercial successes, painful and bloody as that journey may be. Again, Latin America and Asia give us many good examples including India – a country that has gone on to become a nuclear power and a major economic force today.

Perhaps Africa's customary traditions give us other pointers. Many parts of Africa have patriarchal traditions and customs that go back many centuries and are still strongly intertwined with modern African society. We seem to have transferred these patriarchal attitudes to our approach to leadership in the modern-day world. We see this in the way many African private companies are run – almost entirely on the whims and caprices of the owners, without regard for proper commercial justifications or sound strategic considerations. This may be excusable, to some extent, for private enterprise but not for national governments where we see similar tendencies.

Many African heads of state come into office and flagrantly demonstrate that satisfying their greed and kleptomania are of paramount importance and nothing else matters. Even some early indigenous leaders who came to power on a wave of nationalist assertions seemed to lose sight of their priorities later on – no one exemplified this more than the late Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo).

I hear the shouts of protests from Pan-Africanism proponents who prefer to gloss over Africa's deep-rooted problems and focus solely on the continent's positive traits. They may decry these views but I have a two-pronged response.

Firstly, I am African myself and have lived and worked in Africa and elsewhere; so, I am well-qualified to comment on the virtues and ills of the region. Secondly, Africans must be prepared to face some bitter home-truths if we are to make significant progress with our development; progress starts with self-awareness and self-analyses. Unless there is open discussion of these issues it is unlikely that they will ever be adequately and robustly tackled, and will thus continue to deny Africa a place at the table of global economic development sweeping across the world today.

Africa is beset by a myriad of problems – we need robust infrastructure, we need reliable utilities supplies; we need security; we need efficient government protocols, and we need many other things including basic food and water for the poor. But our lack of all of these things in the 21st century stems primarily from our lack of effective leaders and robust governance. And that really is Africa's greatest need. If those who continually blame our previous colonial masters for our current ills need further proof that our governance problems have little to do with our colonial past, they should look closer to home at countries like *Ghana*, *Egypt*, *Lesotho*, *Botswana*, *Morocco*, and *Senegal* – African countries that have made great strides in improving economic conditions for their citizens, irrespective of their individual national histories.

Ghana for example has had a significant period of political stability since the era of Jerry Rawlings, to the extent that it now has a comparatively enviable economic position with growing industries in areas as diverse as tourism, property, IT, and call-centre outsourcing. *Egypt* and *Morocco* have long enjoyed significant economic benefits from sizeable tourism and manufacturing sectors. More recently, Morocco and a couple of other North African countries have also seen the growth of offshore call-centre industries, as has *Senegal*. *Botswana* is another African country where effective governance and sound fiscal policies have nurtured a comparatively successful economy with a per capita GDP of over \$10,000 in 2007. So, I ask: were some of these countries not once colonies? How did it go right for them?

Of course these countries, and others that have made significant economic progress, do have their problems. *Botswana* for example is beset with one of the highest rates of HIV infections world-wide, and *Ghana* still has significant levels of corruption in government and commerce. But what sets these

African countries apart is that they have had periods of relative political stability, spearheaded by effective leaders who took actions to drive progress and development that fostered economic growth. They demonstrate to us how effective leadership and political stability are mutually beneficial, and how this effect in turn benefits the populace through economic development. More importantly, these countries illustrate that we can achieve this in Africa.

Not all development and economic progress can be driven by government leaders. In most efficient free market economies business investment and consumer spending contribute more to growth than government. Government's key contribution is to create the right political and socio-economic climate for private investment to flourish. This creates employment and other opportunities that enrich the populace hence increasing their spending power, and they in turn pump more money into the economic system creating further growth. (It never works perfectly as the current credit crunch in most Western economies demonstrates!)

Such economic growth is what all African leaders should really be pursuing. With the natural resources and relatively cheap labour African countries have, the potential benefits that could ensue from *foreign direct investment* (FDI) are vast. Out-sourced manufacturing and off-shore service industries such as call-centres, data warehousing, software development, and engineering design are just a few examples of sectors which could be developed. Western companies will continue to seek out low-cost countries to site their operations, whether in-house or out-sourced, in order to drive margin improvements. After Latin America, Eastern Europe and Asia, Africa should really be next on this evolutionary trail.

Africa remains the only region in the world with largely untapped commercial potential. The phenomenal growth rate of mobile telecommunications across the continent exemplifies how this potential could be commercially harnessed if done properly. Sadly Africa's potential as a domestic market and an industrial powerbase is being endangered by national leaders whose tendencies to plunder their national coffers and enrich themselves are stifling the continent's attractiveness for investment.

Where Mugabe might today be diversifying Zimbabwe's economy from over-dependence on agriculture to other areas, what we have instead is hyperinflation, starvation, and another African country in the news for all the wrong reasons. Kenya, once counted as a major tourist destination and one of Africa's most developed democracies is now overrun by wanton violence and citizens who are refugees in their own country.

Funny enough, disappointing as this may be, I am more worried about what such occurrences spell for Africa with the future generations of leaders growing up in this dysfunctional leadership climate. Are these African leaders of tomorrow likely to be any better than their predecessors? Sadly, I think the chances look no better than fifty-fifty right now, but let's hope that changes.

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