

SUB-SAHARIAN DEMOCRATIC TRANSITIONS AS POLITICAL CRISIS (1990-1994)

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*Like development, democratization is not something that people does for another.
People must do it for themselves or it does not happen.*

Claude AKE, in *Journal of Democracy*, 2 (1991) 1.

The processes of transition occur in conjunctures which are times of crisis. This makes possible the change of apolitical regime¹. Such changes, when introduced in an authoritarian rule, may be orientated in three different ways : the installation of some form of democracy, the restoration of a new authoritarian regime or the emergence of a revolutionary alternative (O'Donnel, 1986 : p. 8). This paper concentrates on the first of these scenarios : democratisation . This will be observed within the context of sub-Saharan Africa in the period between 1990 and 1994. Is democratisation a direct consequence of a new global order in that it is an adjustment of the form of government in the periphery ? Or is it a response which is more complex of local political systems is to be more understood as a conjunctural crisis. The two others scenarios must however be kept in mind. Authoritarian restoration has been the result of many transitions. Moreover the absence of a revolutionary alternative during this period is an interesting question about events that... did not occur.

The democratic transitions are characterised by the widening of political competition and by a suspension of coercion. The beginning of this process, can be seen as being similar to 'liberalisation'. A moderate group within the authoritarian elite accepts a negociation with a moderate group of the opposition when the cost of coercion is expected to be higher than the benefits of the liberalisation (O'Donnel, 1986 : 15s.). However, the majority of the actors in African political systems became rapidly involved in a more ambitious competition. They perceived their as being that of a complete democratisation. Many of them were drawn to this

position by the pressures of external demands and local mobilisations. The opening of political competition was supposed to enable these actors to escape from the control of the elites and to develop mass participation through a new public sphere. The principal change was the introduction of political pluralism. This point of view considers multi-partism as the achievement of a sustainable political change. There were few objections concerning the problems of importing a western procedure; more the importation was not considered as a transformation of the struggle for power but as an extension of political participation. Many discourses and representations about liberalisation have been depicted as democratisation. Retrospectively, most actors and analysts continue to interpret these processes through the theories of democratic transitions. One of the objectives of this paper is to discuss this point. Another point is that of discussing the dialectics of internal and external influences in these “democratisations” ; while the final point consists in questioning the interpretation of the transition by local political cultures.

EXTERNAL PRESSURES AND INTERNAL MOBILISATION

There are many traces of the process of liberalisation to be found in Africa before 1990. The transformations of these political regimes occurred through cyclical “ decompressions ” as the “civilisation” of a military rule ² or as the result of the introduction of electoral competition within a one party system ³. These changes can be explained by the internal development of each political system. They do not occur at the same time, or during a specific period. During the three first decades of post independence (1960 - 1990), most of the African states experimented variations between authoritarian rule and liberalisation. Only a few of them benefited from a sustainable experience in multiparty politics, such as in Senegal or Botswana.

The perspective in 1990 is shaped by two different facts which occur simultaneously. The first is the claim for “full” democracy, including multi-party system and human rights. The

¹ This paper relies on a comparative study of 7 African “ democratic ” transitions during the period 1990 and 1994. (Benin, Cameroon, Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, Zambia and Burkina-Faso) : Jean-Pascal Daloz & Patrick Quantin - *Transitions démocratiques africaines*, Paris, Karthala, 1997.

² By the creation of a party. For instance, MNSD in Niger under Kountche or RPT in Togo under Eyadema.

³ For instance in PDCI of Côte d’Ivoire and KANU of Kenya in the early 1980.

second consists in the extension of this project all over the continent ⁴. This simultaneity cannot be explained as an accident because to many African see this change as affecting their trajectories. The influence of external pressures on these societies is obvious. The origins of these pressures are found in the role of international actors : World Bank, International Monetary Fund and western donors : United States, France, Germany, etc. Their doctrine is expressed in the concept of “political conditionality” of which the report of the World bank “From crisis to sustainable development” (World bank, 1989) provides a viable description of Africa before the beginning of democratic transitions. The French equivalent of this report is produced one year later in the famous “discours de la Baule” (June 1990). It is, however interesting to note that the French policy was in favour of liberalisation during the past decade ⁵.

The change in external pressures is the prevalence of the concept of “democracy” among donors’ discourses ; it is not in the strength of these pressures. Long before 1990, African states were subjected to strong but divergent external pressures. The existence of so many authoritarian regimes resulted in the control of some foreign domination which acted as shield from international sanctions. Plebiscitary regimes and military dictatorships received economic and military support, not only from Moscow, Beijing or Cuba, but also from Paris and Washington.

After 1990, the exportation of western democratic procedures in all the African countries, regardless their past preferences and institutions, can be seen as the effect of the emergence of a new global order in which a unique style of government and type of legitimacy has become available. However the strategy for changing the political systems does not involve an increase of pressures. At the beginning of most democratic transitions, external pressures acted in reducing the support given to authoritarian groups in power - especially to the hard liners - without delivering equivalent facilities to the emerging oppositions. This careful non-intervention, despite of vigorous pro-democratic discourses, made easy the electoral victory of about 50 % of incumbent presidents between 1990 and 1994. Furthermore, if a man from the opposition was elected, his government was rarely supported by exceptional aid : so as to

⁴ The exceptions are countries involved in “old” democratisation experiences (Senegal, Botswana, Zimbabwe...) or affected by civil war (Sudan, Liberia ...)

⁵ One of the ambiguities of French African politics in 1990 comes from two possible interpretations of the new orientation of the “ discours de La Baule ” pronounced by F. Mitterrand. Incumbent African presidents consider it as the continuation of the liberalisation process (which does not threaten their position) ; the opposition leaders see it as an opportunity for taking power through free and fair elections.

facilitate a hypothetical consolidation of the new institutions. This was particularly true about the democratic bonus (“*primes à la démocratisation*”) promised by the French president in 1990. In the French sphere of influence, it appears, retrospectively, that new democratic presidents received less aid for their country than former dictators confirmed by ambiguous elections (Banégas & Quantin, 1997). Ironically, the pressures of the new global order in Africa have been exerted by abstention more than through positive action. The most influential foreign governments - i.e. : U.S. and France - left the local actors to struggle for power through open competition before identifying a winner. As the winner was seen as being expected to be the only one able to maintain or to restore public order, these governments accepted to ignore electoral fraud or abuses in human rights.

Besides the influence of donors, other external factors can be mentioned as taking part in a general explanation of these democratic transitions. Among them, the crisis of the African economies increased the dependence to the donors and made difficult any resistance to their pressures. However, it is not possible to see these processes as being responses to external demands. The variations which can be observed among different transitions show the importance of local mobilisation. If the initial signs came from outside, the opening of political competition and a new interest in participation are seen as the result of internal processes. This is not to say that the African state apparatus were able to control the situation. On the contrary, they were often ignored during the transition. The “*Conférences nationales*”, the election organising committees, some “*collèges arbitraux*”⁶, and many monitoring committees were institutions which developed their activities out of the control of the African states while neglecting to pay attention to the question of state legitimacy. This weakness of the state during the transition clouds the distinction between internal and external factors. It appears more important however to distinguish local processes from the pressures of a global order.

This is the reason why the question of external pressures cannot be tackled separately when we try to explain the development of a transition in an African country. These developments show important variations from the theoretical model proposed by “*political conditionality*”. And the principal factor of divergence relies on the forms of local mobilisation which produce a specific political crisis dominated by uncertainty and not simply the certitude

⁶ For example, according to an agreement signed by political parties, the dispute about 1993 post transition elections in Congo were submitted to an international court outside of the country (in Gabon).

of the transfer of an external model of governance. It is necessary to illustrate this with some examples.

LIBERALISATION OR DEMOCRATISATION ?

In Benin, local actors were able to play different strategies in the breakdown of the authoritarian regime. The result of the crisis - which begins in 1989 and is terminated in 1991 with the installation of a new democratic president by free and fair elections - is not the scenario initiated by the most influential source of external pressure. To put an end to the demonstrations which happened because of economic difficulties, France (through its ambassador in Cotonou) proposed a restricted liberalisation, including the opening of the party (PRPB) to representatives of the "civil society". By the end of 1989, it was evident that President Kerekou would stay in power and control the process of decompression. The strength of the mobilisation, the absence of open repression from the "dictablanda" and the realignment in opposition parties of many supporters of the incumbent regime gave way to a new configuration which is illustrated by the "conférence nationale souveraine" of February 1990. When the opposition parties decided to transform the "national conference" - which was initially devoted to reform the one-party state - into a sovereign assembly, President Kerekou and the military threatened them by force. The army finally gave up and lost its dominant position in the process. This pacific solution was influenced by pressures from France and other donors which prevented the use of coercion. This attitude was more inspired by "laissez faire" than by a clear strategy of political conditionality.

This happened just after the fall of the Berlin wall and the death of the Ceacescus. The fluid conjuncture prevailing then in the international relations gave new opportunities to such uncertain political experiments in the periphery of the world system. After Benin, numerous African states were involved in mobilisation for democratisation ; among the first to benefit from this opportunity in 1990 were almost all former French colonies but also Cap Vert and Zambia. During 1990, democratic transitions were launched by local mobilisations without external strong pressures on the incumbent authoritarian governments. Most of them organised multi-party elections. And the problem of democratic conditionality became more accurate when they tried and oftentimes succeeded in corrupting the process or in stealing the votes.

Sometimes, a very simple action of an influent protector was sufficient for changing a blocked transition. For instance, by withdrawing overnight the communication facilities - including a helicopter's pilot -, the French government forced President Kolingba of Central Africa Republic to admit his defeat in the elections. However, many cases were much more complicated and the position of the external pressures more ambiguous. In Cameroon, President Biya, supported by France all along a violent political crisis, kept his position instead of rigged elections denounced by the U.S. But Washington, after supporting opposition parties in Kenya, was not so suspicious when deciding to accept Daniel arap Moi's victory.

After the first phase of transition experiences, by 1991 - 1992, western and multilateral pressures became more prudent and conservative. The concept of "good governance", introduced by multilateral agencies (B. Campbell, 1996), is progressively introduced in replacement of democracy. The political conditionality is still used by the European Union and donors like the Scandinavian countries. U.S., France and Great Britain stay severe censors only in the African countries where their interests are low⁷. Where they stood in a dominant position for influencing internal developments, they gave their preference to strong incumbents instead of supporting uncertain newcomers. This attitude explains why only a dozen transitions among 48 countries of sub-Saharan Africa were terminated by the election of a new president competing as leader or member of an opposition party⁸. This limited impact of democratisation has local explanations but it also shows that the end of the bipolarized world system was not a sufficient change for some western powers to give up their control on African politics.

The case of Congo confirms this hypothesis. The control on oil production by the French company Elf-Aquitaine did not prevent an open political competition among the local political elite. As long as the Congolese actors did not threaten the company's interests, they benefited from a large autonomy which explains the complexity of the local arena. During 1990, there are no external pressures for political change on Sassou Nguesso's military regime. The pressures come from trade-unions which organise strikes and street demonstrations, and

⁷ Because of their massive presence in Africa, it is easy to point out U.S. and France contradictions. However, it is interesting to note that in some countries like Zimbabwe, France can support discretely dissident political personalities (like Elisabeth Dongo) while Great Britain is reluctant to criticise Mugabe's *de facto* one party state.

⁸ This does not take into account that among this dozen of newcomer presidents, many were former members of the authoritarian regime elite. P. Lissouba, elected in 1992 in Congo, had been Prime minister in 1964 - 1996 under Massemba-Debat one-party state ; A. F. Patasse, elected in CAR in 1993, was Bokassa's prime minister when the Marechal became an Emperor in 1977, etc.

these actions are extended with the defection of party hard liners who join the new democratic opposition. In this context, the authoritarian president was obliged to accept a democratic transition that his external supports considered as dangerous. All along the development of the crisis, until the end of 1992, the French wanted to impose a compromise in which Sassou Nguesso could have stay in an influent position in the local political system in order to avoid changes in oil policies⁹. But they did not succeed in spite of a direct intervention in financing the state.

In that example, it is clear that democratisation does not appear as a consequence of a new global order in which the rules of the local struggle for power and the styles of government are imported from abroad. The analysis of more African societies reveals also the existence of long term trajectories which impose internal constraints to the emergence of a transition and to the success of this transition when it really happens¹⁰. These experiences are not complete break up. They have to be explained as the continuation of a same political system in which the only difference is the existence of a political crisis.

From this point of view, recent African democratic transitions are not to be evaluated by their result : is it a ‘‘real’’ democratisation ? is their a consolidation ? More important is the operation of the internal political conflicts. During the transitional crisis, there is an extension of the mobilisation which involves more people than in the routine periods. Large sectors of society are included, for a moment, in the political process. This inclusion presents some resemblance with the theoretical conception of democratisation ; it looks like a new form of participation. People take part in collective actions like meetings, demonstrations, strikes, riots, etc. They have more interest in politics. However, the return to stable conjuncture, even in a democratised regime, shows the difficulty of transforming mobilisation in participation.

The specificity of African political dynamics is shown in the strength of the protests during the crisis. It varies from a country to an other by the sectors which are involved. Some, like Zambia and Congo, were led by trade unions ; others, by students and the youth. Urban people were generally more vocal than peasants. But, in any case, the transformation of this energy in institutionalised participation was a central problem for democratic consolidation.

⁹ The best preference for France was, during the election period of mid 1992, a Lissouba - Sassou ticket in which the former president could have stay as Prime minister. This scenario eventually failed and the result was a civil war in 1993 - 1994.

¹⁰ The notion of ‘‘trajectory’’ in African states is developed in Bayart (1989) ; Bratton and Van de Walle (1994) confirm the importance of this approach in their comparative study of African democratic transitions.

The organisation of multi-party elections was dominated by the realignment of political elites. This produced in most countries a fierce competition which did not facilitated the opening of a public sphere but transformed the political arena in a more or less violent place which the ordinary people deserted. The conditions of possibilities for participation, with the necessity of information and discussion, were difficult to improve. In many cases, - excepted the new free press - it disappeared the day after the election.

If, after Robert Dahl, we use the two factors of participation and competition for describing democratisation, it is obvious that in the short term of the transitions, the second has partly covered the first so that the new political systems, even after free elections, suffer instability and poor mass support (Dahl, 1971). This can explain why very few experiences can be considered as a transformation of mobilisation for democratisation into democratic participation.

The introduction of open competition in systems which had avoid it before is the principal new element in African politics. But this is not to say that competition did not exist before. The struggle for high positions in the state apparatus was violent and dangerous for the few peoples involved in it. What is new is the public dimension of the game. Free elections do not allow an increased participation of voters in public policy decisions but it make them spectators of something which was hidden before. Instead of integrating them in a public sphere, they contribute to desacralise political institutions. The idea that a president may be defeated because he won less votes than an other is not easy to admit for most of African political cultures. A "big man" is supposed to stay in power as long as he is overthrown by a tragic fate or by a stronger power. Besides of this problem correlated with the question of an effective change in political leadership, their is an other question which concerns the perception of the democratic changes by the population.

“CAN WE EAT DEMOCRACY ?”

In all that have been discussed before, we supposed that actors were rational and that they were playing on both internal and external arenas. However, in the analysis of recent democratisation experiences in Africa, the watershed of explanations seems to be elsewhere if we consider the dimension of believes and representations. There is a gap between the model

of liberal democracy and the expectations of populations. The development of democratisation processes show different fields of interpretation in which the modernisation of political institutions is not considered as a priority. A more relevant approach must take into account two dimensions to which local public opinion is sensitive : the instrumentalism of everyday life and the mystical universe of religion. In this perspective, it is difficult to find an adequate equivalence between the common sense representations and the ideological ground of liberal democracy.

A global economic and political order is not perceived in the heterogeneity of cultural local identities. This is not a problem because people do not have to be conscious of globalisation for globalisation to exist. It seems however different for democratisation. It is difficult to imagine it as a pure procedural process independent of the values of the social context in which it takes place. In Africa, the debate about liberal democracy was poor before 1990. Different versions of “ africanized ” democracy existed in experiences tested by leaders like Nyerere or Kaunda. Some other regimes defined themselves after the Marxist notion of “popular democracy” like in Benin or Congo-Brazzaville. However, the references to the rule of majority, to the existence of a legal opposition, to more than one party or to free elections were unknown out of the circle of intellectual elites. These notions were not part of local political cultures. Before 1990, it is hard to find a political party using the reference to multi-party system¹¹. This is why most of the new democratic parties after 1990 were led by former members of the authoritarian establishment, sometimes hiding behind “civil society” personalities¹² or “technocrats”¹³. This restricted change in the elite does not prove the specificity of African political system ; the same remark can be made about USSR and some countries in Eastern Europe during the same period (Rumania, Bulgaria). It just reminds us that African countries belong to the same categories as those others which have never experienced democratic institutions.

Democracy *per se* is not on the agenda of African societies because the development of African states depends on more radical changes than the implementation of liberal procedures in government recruitment. During a survey in Zambia in 1994, a researcher trying to get local definitions of democracy found a question instead of the answer he was looking for : “can we

¹¹ The MORENA (Mouvement de la rénovation nationale), launched by the Gabonese opposition in the early 1980, is one of these exceptions. It turned into confusion after a split during the 1990 transition.

¹² Like F. Chiluba, leader of the Zambia Trade Union Congress.

¹³ Like N. Soglo in Bénin or A. Milongo in Congo, both from the World bank.

eat democracy ?” (Daloz & Quantin, 1997). It looks like a joke but it is not when the people who use such a definition have suffered a dramatic increase of the cost of food after the “democratisation” of the regime. The connection between the multi-party system and the structural adjustment plan is at the core of the perception of the new global order by people in Zambia and in many other countries in Africa. This explains the difficulty of a spontaneous adoption of the democratic ideology and the strong critics about it.

On the other hand, considered from the bottom, the believes systems in African societies show, during the last decade, a greater propensity in religion than in politics. Local churches and traditional practices have more significance than party politics which people only consider as instruments without legitimacy. Like other imported ideologies such as socialism, democracy does not deliver a satisfying ground for a new utopia. This is obvious if we consider the interpretation given to democratic transitions. The competition is not between different conceptions of politics but it involves the capacities of different big men to represent traditional figures of power. For instance, in Congo, the choice between the candidates in the 1992 presidential election depends on their attitudes in respecting traditional obligations and taboos during the past whatever the platform they proposed¹⁴. Similar observations can be noted in many other countries. In Benin, President Soglo after escaping from death by poison decided to adopt the protection of Yoruba sorcery.

For different reasons which have been shortly summarised in this paper, African societies show a strong resistance to adopt democratic procedures of government. Democratisation as a direct effect of a new global order can be considered, for the moment, as a failure of an imported model. If a democratic transition has to succeed in a short period of three or four years, the chances for a such a transformation are definitely broken in many countries. The chances for “consolidation” stay in some others. But it is not obvious that there is a real interest for countries in the centre of this new global order to facilitate or to force the peripheral members to become democratic.

¹⁴ The best description is in : Gruénais, Mouanda & Tonda, 1995.

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