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## AFRICA: THE MULTIPARTY DEBATE

G. Mgongo Fimbo

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# WORKING PAPERS

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c/o Publications Office - Institute of Social Studies - P.O. Box 29776  
2502 LT The Hague - The Netherlands



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## AFRICA: THE MULTIPARTY DEBATE

### Introduction

In this paper I present an analysis of the contemporary intellectual debate on multipartyism in Africa. I shall identify perspectives to this debate. I shall point to the underlying assumptions behind the debate. My central task is to develop a conceptualization of the movement for multipartyism in Africa. The subject is vast and remarkably refreshing literature is being churned out every day. If I may borrow Margery Perham's expression, it is "rather like approaching an elephant with a tape measure, the size and shape of the object baffles us; and being alive, it will not keep still". (Owusu, 1992:373). Let me hasten to add that I have quoted liberally from the leading spokes-persons of the debate so that the reader appreciates the argumentation.

'Second liberation', 'Second Independence' and 'New wind of change'. These are some of the terms currently being used to describe the dramatic political turbulence that has been sweeping across Black Africa. (Ripley, 1992:539). In this wind of change, African dictators have fallen or been forced to concede multipartyism. The events in Africa did not take scholars by surprise as asserted by Decalo (1992:7), rather they characteristically began to produce theories. They have striven to explore the philosophical basis of the democratisation process in general, and competitive party system in particular, its content and chances of success or endurance in Africa. I wish to point out that I have not characterized contributors to the debate into left and right;<sup>1</sup> rather I have classified them into Africans and Africanists. Africans are African scholars who write about Africa whereas Africanists are located in the developed North; writers and scholars concerned with Africa. This classification is important for two reasons. Firstly, it brings out clearly the African contribution to the debate. The second reason follows from the first, namely, I submit as Owusu (1992:370) and Davidson do that Africa must find its own solution — "solutions that will work because they grow out of Africa's experience and Africa's circumstances". (Davidson, 1990:21). Two perspectives may be isolated for the purposes of exposition here. My pedagogical approach is that I shall outline the two perspectives followed by a critique at the end.

### Multipartyism as an imposition on the South by the developed North

The first perspective states that multipartyism is an imposition on Africa by the developed North and is a new form of dominating the world. I shall begin with the African view. The first contribution comes from Kafureeka (1993) who espouses this theory more eloquently than any other African. He states,

If the west admits that it supported dictators whom it knew were harming Africa in order to protect its cold war interests, if we mattered so little that its ideologies were above our lives, then it would be stupid of us not to realize that it is enforcing "democracy" in Africa because that's what suits its interests today. That's why democracy, is only defined as multipartyism, a democracy for the status quo, a democracy that does not question the unjust structures that need to be restructured. That's why it emphasises structural adjustment programmes that violate the lives of the people while it talks of human rights. (Kafureeka, 1993:93-94, slightly edited)

He argues that multipartyism is a form of western fundamentalism and is based on unilinear assumptions that all societies should follow the same route to the peak of political progress.

What we are witnessing in Africa today is, like the modernization scheme in the 1950s and 60s, multipartyism presented as a prerequisite for democratization which is another form of western fundamentalism. It is a deliberate attempt to make the world in its own image and to suit its own interests. If this insight is bought, then multipartyism which is imposed cannot be anything else but a new form of domination of the world. (1993:94)

Kafureeka argues that the insistence by the west on multipartyism in Africa is history blind. He reminds us that this is not the first time Africa is seeing multipartyism and queries whether the conditions which led to its failure have been altered. Kafureeka is opposed to multipartyism because it has no respect for innovation and for other peoples' histories.

We do not oppose multipartyism just because it's from the West. For there is nothing wrong with learning from others, and great civilizations have always occurred where two systems met resulting into hybridization, we do not oppose it because we favour dictatorships, we only oppose it as a global democratization scheme which is history blind and with no respect for other peoples histories. Multipartyism is presented to other peoples of the world as an ideal end in itself rather than a means. It is not seen as a product of democratic struggles. Thus it threatens to be a bottleneck to further democratization like in Zambia where people almost found themselves at the end of the road after elections. (1993:94, slightly edited)

The second is Decalo (1992) who argues that whereas redemocratization of Africa is of monumental importance, it also carries negative repercussions. He sees a likelihood of the recolonization of Africa due to Africa's dependence on aid.

Assuming the process of redemocratization continues to its logical conclusion in much of the continent, what is its significance, and what are its prospects of survival in the future? What will have been attained — and, given continued external conditionalities, can to some extent be sustained — is Africa's political rebirth. Indeed, it is a sort of return to square one — decolonization, though from domestic politically hegemonic groups — but, given the severe aid conditionalities that can be expected, this 'second independence' may well be a virtual recolonization by global donor agents, very much in the saddle in a unipolar world with only one source of capital, greatly in demand. (Decalo, 1992:29)

The third is Owusu (1992) who, like Kafureeka (1993), sees multipartyism as a new form of imposition. He notes that imported constitutional models have so far not worked in Africa. He asks whether the failures of western-type constitutionalism in Africa are the results of defects within the systems of government that were actually introduced or whether they have been caused by defects within African societies which have implemented them. He considers that attempts to democratize a country must pay serious attention to its history, traditions, culture and symbolic meanings, and economic circumstances.

Unless the rebirth of democracy in Africa is rooted and grounded in the villages and small communities, the end-product is bound to be elitist and another example of the failed urban-biased development. Looked at from the viewpoint of millions of villagers, the global democratic movement sweeping across Africa will only be regarded as a new form of imposition, another 'imperialism', unless it gives ordinary men and women a much more effective 'hand and say' in the management of their affairs. (Owusu, 1992:387).

The fourth contribution is that of Oyediran and Agbaje (1992) who view the democratisation process in Africa as being elite propelled with an ideology of domination and control. They see a link between the democratisation process and the World Bank/IMF sponsored structural adjustment programmes.

It is in this context that the simultaneous pursuit in recent times of political democratisation and economic reforms in Africa, including Nigeria, within the framework of World Bank/IMF-sponsored structural adjustments assumes a more poignant meaning. While the logic of such programmes has been to reduce the salience of the state in the African economy, in reality the outcome has been to foster 'commandism' in determining the tenor and pace of reform, especially in the face of growing popular reaction to the pains of restructuring

the economy in an atmosphere of political liberalisation. The backlash has often been the creation of an anti-mass platform reflecting a lack of faith in the people, identifying democracy with elite-propelled/defined development, institutional reform, and the ideology of domination and control, rather than with the voice and resistance of the masses, or as an end in itself. The aftermath has been that democratisation in Africa has at once been 'overwhelming and fragile'. (Oyediran & Agbaje, 1991:220)

The fifth is Musoke (1993). Writing on Tanzania Musoke is of the firm view that multipartyism is being imposed on Tanzania. He argues that conditions or prerequisites to guarantee the successful adoption of a liberal democratic system do not exist in Tanzania. He isolates the following conditions; firstly, Tanzania is a secular society with no one dominant religion. He notes that non-Christians form a very significant proportion of the population. Therefore, he argues, the western type multiparty democracy being sought or suggested has no similar ideological religious basis as was/is the case in Western Europe and North America. Secondly, the country does not have an indigenously based liberal economy whose development is based on internal forces and dynamic. Thirdly, "the Basic Human Rights clause and individual freedom" being sought or emphasized in the current reforms is based on christianity and western liberalism and not on any Tanzanian cultural norms and values (1993:41).

Do Africans with the above perspective see any alternatives to multipartyism? Kafureeka (1993) advocates political hybridization. He states,

In circumstances where brutal dictatorship threatens to stabilize, multipartyism as a method of struggle needs to be encouraged in order to break through the suffocating grip of dictatorship, but where alternatives exist like in Ghana and Uganda it should not be a question of either or. Multipartyism and other alternatives should allow people to retain the initiative and to appropriate whatever benefits multipartyism may deliver. Only this pluralist approach will allow cultural intercourse and produce political hybridization and be acceptable to the people of other areas. (Kafureeka, 1993:99, slightly edited)

Owusu advocates popular participatory democracy based on African conception of community. Noting that the competitive party system has proved in practice to be primarily a mechanism of elite competition, recruitment circulation, and control in both the Westminster parliamentary and U.S. presidential style of government, Owusu advocates that "it is in the country side, not the towns and cities, where the new institutions and structures of democracy adapted to local traditions should take root and radiate to regional and national political centres" (1991:376). Accordingly, Owusu argues that decentralisation is an antidote to the concentration and corruption of power and is a means of ensuring that the basic needs

and expectations of local communities and citizenry are respected. "Popular, participatory democracy based on African concepts of community appears to be an essential element in any meaningful answer to endemic political and economic troubles". (1992:380).

I have identified three Africanists who are associated with the above perspective, namely, Basil Davidson, Andre Frank and Jean Copans. In a recent published interview, Davidson (1990) states that Africans must find their own solutions. He even suggests that a one-party state "which is married together with form of democratic participation which the party does not control" is an open question. I shall quote him at length to show how he articulates his position. Davidson was asked as follows; "how does one reconcile this need for democratic structures at the base with political structures at state level, given that broadly speaking we have only one party or military rule in Africa, with rare exception? How is there to be any democracy expressed? And can any kind of viable democracy occur within the context of a one party state?"

Davidson responded with regard to the one-party state and imposed solutions from outside.

Let's take the questions in reverse order. All experience so far shows that the one-party Leninist executive state is a programme for infallible disaster. ...The executive-party state is one where all the power from the top to the bottom goes down through the party. That is what they've had in the Soviet Union - it doesn't work. So you have to get rid of that.

But the question still remains whether you can have a one-party state in which this doesn't happen, one which is married together with forms of democratic participation which the party does not control. That seems to me still to be an open question.

Generally, the one-party state exists no more than the military party state - they are all no-party states. And they're constantly told, are they not, that they must therefore open the gates to more parties, many parties, as many parties as any demagogue may shout for. They're told, quite falsely as it happens, that this is how Western democracy has come about. And they're told this, let me insist again, as if there were no political history in Africa before colonial invasions and dispossessions. Well, it's time these complacent outsiders stopped preaching their solutions — solutions which clearly haven't worked, aren't appropriate and derive from an entirely non-African history. (Davidson, 1990:20-21).

Copans (1991) views multipartyism in the context of human rights and the role of the state. He expresses total lack of confidence in the state in Africa.

But to speak of human rights is to raise also the question of the supervision and control of those rights by the state itself. Recent African history does not allow us to have confidence in the state for any legal, ideological or political matter. Multipartyism can always be reinvented by astute heads of state (like Bongo or Mobutu); and it is always possible to change semantics and symbols. (Copans, 1991:98).

Frank (1991) presents a pessimistic view of Africa and the Third World. He argues that the Third World cannot escape dependence on the world economy and that attempts at 'delinking' Third World countries from the capitalist world economy are futile. In his own words,

No policy can yield independence from the world economy. For all are dependent, or interdependent as it is now fashionable to say, in one way or another even if some are more equal and (inter)dependent than others. History has demonstrated materially that even (temporarily) being a 'superpower', or adopting 'socialism' cannot offer non-dependence or independence from world economic development and history.

A fortiori, the 'Third World' cannot escape dependence, let alone by going into debt, which is only another expression and instrument of dependence in the world system. Therefore by the mid-1980s, I concluded that 'delinking' Third World countries from the 'capitalist' world economy, as I had advocated in the 1960s is no longer a realistic policy. Moreover 'liberation' through domestic 'socialism' in Third World countries offers scarce alternatives. (Frank, 1991:25).

Frank notes the desirability of electoral democracy but argues that electoral democracy is threatened by the debt burden in the Third World. He warns that as long as the debt burden continues, the debt ridden countries in the economies in the South will continue to suffer and the debt will continue to threaten their democracies (1991:29). Lastly, Frank foresees battles among ethnic, nationalist and chauvinist groups because of the limitations of the electoral process organised through political parties. (1991:32).

Whereas Copans and Frank do not offer alternatives to multipartyism, Davidson does. He states confidently that Africa must find its own solutions. It seems those solutions do not include multipartyism.

But if these grand solutions from outside haven't worked — and the 'Eastern' ones have collapsed even more completely than the 'Western' ones — then surely there may be scope for saying that the Africans, out of their own history, developing that history remodelling that history, can find their own

solutions — solutions that will work because they grow out of Africa's experience and Africa's circumstances? (Davidson, 1991:21)

### Multipartyism as an Aspect of Democracy

I shall now turn to the second perspective. This perspective sees multipartyism as a positive development in Africa and as an aspect of democracy. The first contribution in this perspective is from Mmuya and Chaligha (1992). In their recent publication titled *Towards Multiparty Politics in Tanzania*, Mmuya and Chaligha theorise development of multipartyism in Tanzania in the context of limitations of the single party system. The first limitation, according to them is that the single party system stifles initiative because of the numerous controls imposed upon its citizens. In this regard the single party determined who should contest for which positions in all elections within the party, within the government system and even in some associations like football clubs, women's organizations etc. Allied to stifling of initiative is lack of flexibility. The two authors put it in this way.

The weakness of the single party system in this regard was clearly demonstrated during the economic crisis which began in the late 1970s... What is of significance here is that the single party system with its whole government and party bureaucracy was not energetic enough to respond appropriately to the conditions of the early 1980s. Instead it was rigidly tied to an inflexible ideology and ideals such that, again, individuals sought alternative means of livelihood. So one important explanation for the emergence of the move towards multipartism can be located in this restrictive character of the single party system. Some members of the Tanzanian society were fatigued by the system that kept them out and sought for means to participate in the governance process. The multiparty framework appeared to be such means. (1992:15).

The second limitation is the tendency towards bureaucratization of politics whereby politics became the preserve of a few highly placed state and party officials cum politicians. Thirdly is the problem of accountability. Where there is such close relationship between the party and the state under the one party system then it becomes difficult to hold any one accountable for misdeeds or incompetence. The authors pose the question whether a multiparty system of necessity will bring about more democracy in Tanzania and proceed to answer it,

What is taking place in Tanzania presently provides the potential for more democracy affordable by the wider space that is evolving. There may be ample room for political participation and association after controls are eased and eventually completely eliminated. (1992:7)

The second is Shivji (1991) who castigates those who see the number of parties as the central issue. According to him the central issue is the question of democracy and that the party system is only an aspect of democracy.

In my opinion, the central issue in the debate is the question of democracy. Changes in Eastern Europe and pressures from the West have merely created some space for a debate which was always on the agenda so far as the popular forces are concerned. Our debate therefore should not be diverted. It should focus on the larger question of democracy and should be rooted in our own historical experience - frankly owning up to our past 'mistakes'; drawing lessons for the future and being courageous enough to propose what may have been unthinkable only a couple of years ago. This is not to say that other experiences can or should be ignored. But their relevance has to be established. We must approach other experiences honestly with a view to understanding and explaining our own situation rather than rationalise and justify some pre-conceived prejudices. Ultimately though our point of departure and reference should be our own political practices over the last three decades of independence, not only in eventually arriving at any specific decision, but in forging the methods of making that decision. (Shivji, 1991:83)

Shivji identifies two pitfalls of the debate on democracy. Firstly, it is "threatening to become an unabashed celebration of liberalism". Secondly, contributors to the debate demonstrate a total lack of faith in the masses of the African people. According to him the debate on democracy should articulate anti-imperialism and anti-compradore — state positions.

Democracy from a liberal perspective, I argue, is part of the ideology of domination — in Africa essentially a moment in the rationalisation and justification of compradorial rule. While, as an ideology of resistance and struggle, democracy can only be case in terms of popular democracy whose exact contours and forms of existence can only be determined in actual social struggles in given, concrete, historical conditions. Yet, at the minimum, it has to be an ideology which articulates anti-imperialism and anti-compradore - state positions. (1991:82)

The third is Mamdani (1993). He notes that the pro-democracy movement of today in Africa is mainly urban based and is anchored in civil society. It speaks the language of liberalism calling for a multiparty electoral system. He argues that democratization must

involve the peasant majority by "dismantling of the uncivil colonial state that strangles the peasantry in a web of extra-economic coercion" (1993:45). Accordingly, Mamdani asserts, an appropriate political agenda must appeal to both civil society and the peasantry.

For if we are to arrive at a political agenda that can energize and draw together various social forces in the highly fragmented social reality that is contemporary Africa, we need to devise an agenda that will appeal to both civil society and peasant communities, that will incorporate both the electoral choice that civil society movements seek and the quest for community rights that has been the consistent objective of peasant-based movements (1993:47).

With regard to this perspective, I shall refer to two Africanists, Ripley and Kasfir. Ripley (1992) records social and economic conditions that are necessary for the appearance and survival of democratic forms of government; namely an educated population, with both political knowledge and the will to act, coupled with a modern industrial economy, a homogenous society, and a long established set of democratic political values. His assessment is that African states have few of these conditions. Ripley is hopeful, nevertheless,

[I]t would seem that Africa can nurture some forms of liberal democracy - as seen in Senegal and Botswana and it is currently witnessing the emergence of more pluralist, and certainly more participative, form of politics. There are thus grounds for hope, despite the many challenges the new democracies face (1992:549).

Kasfir (1992) notes that the primary actors in multiparty democratic theory are not the voters, but the small groups of leaders who organise parties. He opines that basing democracy on party competition, then, means emphasising institutions rather than direct popular participation, and leaders rather than citizens. Accordingly, drawing on the potency of mass participation which helped to topple African governments Kasfir theorises on institutionalisation of popular participation.

The extraordinary success of popular mass action puts popular sovereignty at the top of the agenda of constitutional drafters... The problems considered here are the theoretical and practical grounds for justifying the constitutional expression of popular sovereignty where mass politics has given a new democratic opening in the Third World states. The basic choice explored is whether to give the people the power to rule directly through popular assemblies, or indirectly through representative political institutions (1992:588).

### Multipartyism in the context of the right to self-determination

I shall now attempt a critique of the above two perspectives. In my submission the first perspective overemphasizes the international dimension and ignores completely the internal struggles in the form of strikes, demonstrations etc within Africa. Further it blocks the multiparty debate and forecloses inquiry into sustainability of a multiparty system in Africa. The stance of Frank, (who in the 1960s articulated the underdevelopment theory) is defeatist and does not allow Third World countries including Africa to come out of the hole. Once again the Third World peoples are the 'wretched of the earth'. Much as I respect Frank's concern for the Third World I reject his stand. In my submission, the African masses, like their brothers and sisters in South East Asia, have political space for manoeuvre internally and on the international stage. Hinkelammert (1993:113) has profoundly stated that "the process of searching for an alternative and the insistence that an alternative must be found are matters that are saturated with class. It is the dominant class that proclaims that there are no alternatives." Frank may be singing the song of the dominant class in the North. I concur with Hinkelammert that "alternatives are not extruded from a sausage machine. They are discovered or invented only when it becomes perfectly clear that we cannot survive without them." (1993:13).

The second perspective recognises the struggles of the African masses, urbanites and peasants, and locates inquiry around them. It is Afro-centric. The perspective tends to underestimate the forces of Frank's world economy. That notwithstanding, it is, in my opinion, a useful starting point. I shall improve the debate by adding another dimension to it, that is, by conceptualising the movement towards multipartyism as a struggle for realisation of the peoples' right to self-determination.

The right to self determination (also referred to as "the right of people to self-determination") is recognised as a right in international law. It first arose during the bourgeois democratic revolution in the 18 and 19 century Europe. It has two components, political self determination and economic self determination. The former refers to the freedom of the people to choose the form of their governance and government. Whereas the latter has been interpreted by Afro-Asian states exclusively in terms of demands for the New International Economic Order.

The African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights<sup>2</sup> formulates the right to self-determination thus:

**Article 20(1)**

All peoples shall have the right to existence. They shall have the unquestionable and inalienable right to self-determination. They shall freely determine their political status and shall pursue their economic and social development according to the policy they have freely chosen.

Section Two of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Peoples<sup>3</sup> (the Algiers Declaration) is on political self-determination:

**Section II Right to Political Self-determination**

**Article 5**

Every people has an imprescriptible and unalienable right to self-determination. It shall determine its political status freely and without any foreign interference.

**Article 7**

Every people has the right to have democratic government representing all the citizens without distinction as to race, sex, belief or colour, and capable of ensuring effective respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.

On the basis of the African Charter and the Algiers Declaration Shivji (1989) has articulated the right to self-determination into six principal elements and two secondary elements as follows:

**Principal elements:**

- (a) equality of all peoples and nations;
- (b) right of colonised peoples to independence and formation of their own sovereign states;
- (c) right of oppressed nations to self-determination up to and including the right to secession;

- (d) right of all peoples, nations, nationalities, national groups and minorities to freely pursue and develop their culture, traditions, religion and language;
- (e) freedom of all peoples from alien subjugation, domination and exploitation;
- (f) right of all peoples to determine democratically their own socio-economic and political system of governance and government;

**Secondary or derivative elements:**

- (a) right of all peoples to seek assistance from other peoples in its struggle for self-determination;
- (b) principle of state sovereignty, territorial integrity and non intervention by one state in the internal affairs of another state (Shivji, 1989:80).

It is my submission that if we conceptualise multipartyism in terms of the right to self-determination, multipartyism becomes internalised and the African people are elevated to the role of actors and not objects. It follows that African peoples are entitled to debate multipartyism, reject, adopt, adapt or fashion it to suit their circumstances and achieve what Kafureeka terms political hybridization (1993:99). Accordingly, constitution making by the people must be top on the agenda of African countries today. The new constitutions should establish authentic state institutions which are accountable to the people. I submit that representative organs of the people at national level should be based on multiparty competitive elections. Those at the local level, on the other hand, should be nonpartisan. There are precedents already in Africa. The relevant laws currently provide for nonpartisan elections to Village Councils in Tanzania, Resistance Committees in Uganda and District Assemblies in Ghana. I submit, further, that new constitutions should provide for establishment of autonomous or non-state institutions/organisations. The challenge of the African masses in the 1990s is to run these non-state institutions democratically.

The above process entails considerable law making. de Gaay Fortman and Mihyo (1991) think otherwise. They state,

Our analysis has demonstrated that there is a different project which would require at least a similar degree of attention: the making of public policy and law. The priority today is in the creation and strengthening of viable and authentic public institutions related to real processes taking place in society

rather than in the production of numerous laws and decrees... Our analysis has shown that this project would have to be primarily an exercise not in law-making but rather in the unmaking of state law. (Gaay Fortman & Mihyo, 1991:34).

I consider this to be an understatement. In my submission the unmaking of authoritarian state law is necessary; at the same time it is necessary to make new constitutions and new laws. It has been said (Shivji, 1991:91) and, in my opinion, well said that democratic politics must have a legally sound and politically legitimate constitution.



**Notes**

1. Shivji, I.G. (1989), *The Concept of Human Rights in Africa*, CODESRIA BOOK SERIES, London 1989 where contributors to the human rights debate are classified into 'left' and 'right'.
2. The African Charter was adopted by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) in 1981 and came into force on 21 October 1986 after the necessary ratification. The United Republic of Tanzania signed the Charter on 31 May 1982 and ratified it on 18 February 1984.
3. The Algiers Declaration was adopted by a group of jurists, political scientists, sociologists, representatives of trade unions and political parties of various countries as well as representatives of liberation movements at a meeting held in Algiers on 4 July 1976. For text see Shivji, 1989:111-15.



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