

INTERNATIONAL AND GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURES AND THEIR RELATION TO DEMOCRACY: COMMON REPORT ON AFRICA, AMERICA AND ASIA

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SUMMARY

The internal governmental structures in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America have developed along basically similar lines. This is because the histories of these countries have been essentially the same in many respects.

At independence power passed from the colonial powers to charismatic leaders who inherited very extensive political and economic powers. Following disappointing performance by many of these governments, there were calls for more democratic systems of government.

The internal political structures which are now in place in most of Africa, Latin America and Asia have been established to respond to these demands. Most have been influenced by international structures, especially the Charter of the United Nations and the constitutions of continental and regional institutions. Many of these proclaim principles for the promotion of fundamental human rights.

On the whole it can be said that the advancement of democracy and protection of human rights have been assisted by international structures and the ideas behind them.

But not all the effects of the interface with international structures have been entirely positive. Some of the principle have not been easily acceptable or assimilated in certain cultural environments; but some others have only provided opportunities for camouflage and pretence.

In particular the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states has, in the past resulted in suppressions of democracy in some countries, with little or no positive reaction from the international community. This is now being redressed by the adoption of a more pro-active attitude by the international community.

In Africa the record of democratic government has been poor, even compared to the countries of Asia and Latin America. This has been due to a number of factors peculiar to the character of the communities and the colonial history of the

continent in general. Of these the most important are the undemocratic nature of the traditional societies, the counter-democratic legacy of the colonial era, the misuse of unlimited power by leaders of the post-colonial administrations, the interference in the political process by the military, the high levels of endemic poverty and illiteracy, the pervasive presence of the central government in all aspects of political and economic life, the influence of certain negative cultural elements, including the undue influence of ethnic considerations in political discussion and organization and, finally, the absence of a free and responsible press and other media of mass communication and information.

While a great deal has been done in the past decade to advance democracy, the rule of law and the protection of human rights, these negative tendencies have made progress slower and more difficult.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The internal governmental structures in the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America have developed along basically similar lines. This is because the histories of these countries have been the same in many respects. With the exception of a few countries in Asia, and even fewer in Africa, the countries on the three continents were once governed as colonies or parts of metropolitan states in Europe. And, except partially for Latin America, there were fundamental differences between the cultures of the people in the colonial territories and the cultural traditions of their metropolitan rulers.

The colonial dimension

In Africa and Asia colonial administrations, based for the most part on western models and western political and cultural norms, had been imposed on peoples whose traditional systems were based on fundamentally different mental and spiritual orientations. Furthermore, governmental authority in the colonial territories had been in the hands of persons whose outlook on life differed radically from that of the people over whom they exercised political power: in almost all cases the colonial administrators were either officials from Europe or natives of the colonial territories who had been educated to acquire mental and cultural attitudes imported from the metropolitan imperial countries.

In Latin America, the situation was further complicated. Although the cultural traditions of the indigenous populations were different from those

of the imperial powers, large sections of the populations in the colonies were in fact of the same race and culture as the metropolitan European states. These were largely immigrants from those countries or the off-spring of such immigrants. But, even for those of European origin, their long separation from the environment of their origin and the different history and experience in very much changed circumstances had led to the development of a new culture and a way of life which varied significantly from those prevailing in the "mother countries". Another major complication in Latin America was due to the fact that the settlement and colonization of the territories by Europeans was accompanied by the destruction or displacement of old and well established cultural and political systems. The result was that the population of the colonies consisted of two distinct elements – the indigenous people and the new colonial settlers. In most cases relations with the metropolitan states were conducted entirely by the settler communities, to the almost total exclusion of the indigenous peoples. Consequently, in addition to the tension between the colonial rulers and the settler community, there was also the inevitable conflict between the new comers to the territories and the descendants of the original inhabitants.

In this respect the situation in Asia was different. In Asia the colonial territories were for the most part inhabited by peoples who had been in those countries for centuries, in many cases, as parts of well organized political systems. While the old political structures were either destroyed or seriously undermined in the process of colonization, some elements had survived; and these had been grafted onto or incorporated into the new colonial administrative systems. Furthermore, the populations in the colonial territories were much more homogeneous than was the case in Latin America or Africa. For one thing the ethnic and linguistic groups were relatively large entities which had been governed as single units or in some form of political association before colonization. And even in the cases where ethnic and linguistic differences existed, their effects were considerably attenuated by the unifying force of common religion. For example, almost all the countries of Asia which were subjected to colonial rule from the west were predominantly Buddhist or Muslim or Hindu. Because of this the colonial situation in Asia presented not only tensions arising from political and social orientation, but even more serious dichotomies in the religious values and outlooks on life, as between those who governed and those over whom they governed.

In Africa the situation was even more complex. Colonization had intervened in Africa before the process of internal consolidation of peoples and systems could be completed. As a result the peoples of the continent were still divided into a large number of small ethnic units, only a few of

which had operated as organized and stable political systems for any length of time. Moreover, although the philosophical ideas underlying the different traditional religions in Africa were basically similar, religion could not provide the unifying force it did in Asia and Europe. There was no common articulated theology and, more importantly, no accepted common hierarchical authority to pronounce on and enforce doctrine. Consequently, the population units in Africa, even when they were geographically close, remained separate and largely unrelated to each other. The units were thus too weak to stand on their own and they were, therefore, more easily subjugated one at a time by the colonizing powers. Another result was that the colonial territories which finally emerged from the "Scramble for Africa" consisted in each case of large numbers of different ethnic groups which had not previously been closely associated with each other and, in some cases, had actually been in conflict. In such a situation it was easier for the colonial powers to impose their will and values on the peoples in the colonial territories, first to weld the various disparate elements together and secondly, to prevent the different elements from coming together to challenge the hegemony of the colonial power.

But whatever the differences between the countries of the three continents, one common feature of the colonial relationship existed in all of them. In each the system of government run by the colonial administrators was based on structures and ideas which were basically foreign to the majority of the peoples they were administering. Also, the unrepresentative character of colonial rule meant that, while some of the formal features of government in the metropolitan states were imported into the colonies, few of the basic and necessary elements of democratic governance were present in the colonial regimes. For example, legislative power in the colonies was largely in the hands of the colonial State and exercised either by authorities in the metropolitan capitals or by surrogates of the colonial governments resident in the colonies. Where, as in the later stages of the colonial era, some local participation in the legislative process was permitted, care was taken to safeguard the wishes and interests of the colonial powers. This was achieved either by making sure that the "representatives" of the local population were persons who accepted the primacy of the metropolitan will and interest, or by arranging matters in such a way that laws passed by the colonial legislatures would be subject to review and final approval by, or on behalf of, the government of the metropolitan colonial power.

With so many common elements in their pre-independence heritage, it is not surprising that the countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America have followed essentially common patterns of political, social and economic development, after their liberation from colonial rule. And because of the

long association of the countries with the west and the western orientation of the governmental structures which had operated during the long periods of colonial rule, it was only natural that the systems which were adopted in these countries at independence would be based on western ideas, western forms and western procedures. But, as previously noted, these western models were in most cases at variance with the values and world view of the bulk of the populations in the colonial territories. It was, therefore, unrealistic to expect that the structures that operated in the colonial era would survive in the post-colonial situation or, if they survived, that they would work in the same way as they had in the western countries. As is now well-known, the democratic constitutional systems which were bequeathed by the colonial powers – Britain, France, Belgium, Spain, Portugal or the United States – did not survive at all in most of the former colonies. And even where they did survive, as in India, they have worked in very different ways from what was intended.

The situation after the end of colonial rule

In all these countries the pattern has been the same. At independence power passed from the colonial powers to charismatic leaders who had led the struggle – not always peacefully – for independence. Although the powers inherited by these national leaders were generally substantial, with not much real constraints and limitations, this did not appear to raise too many worries and concerns in the euphoric first years of independent nationhood. There was almost everywhere the belief that such powers were necessary in the period of nation-building and, in any case, few believed that these “fathers” of their nations would use the powers given to them otherwise than in the interests of their new states and for the benefit of the people whom they had led and guided in the struggle for the right to govern themselves. In any case, for most of the people there was not that much change since similar unlimited powers had been exercised over them by the colonial administrations. What was new was that those now in power were their own “kith and kin”. Power exercised by these national leaders was not considered as an affront to the dignity of the people in the way that foreign rule had been perceived.

But power did corrupt these new rulers and, because it was absolute power, it corrupted absolutely, and much sooner than anyone could have expected or feared. The nationalist “founders” of the nations or those who followed them in power, could not resist the temptation either to usurp more power or to use what was available to them to promote their personal interests and to benefit those close to them. In Africa, despotic leaders

exploited the power of office for political and economic advantage. In the process they resorted to brutal methods to silence dissent and consolidate themselves in power, leaving no constitutional means for their removal. In Asia, those in political power exploited the traditions of the people to establish paternalistic, corrupt and inefficient administrations. Although these did not generally involve the same level of violence or brutal persecution of opponents, they were, nonetheless, as objectionable and inimical to the interests of the majority of their populations. And in Latin America, the social and religious elite monopolized political and economic power to enrich and maintain themselves in life-styles far removed from what was available to the ordinary man and woman in these countries. To maintain their dominant position, they allied themselves with international business interests which were thus able to exploit the resources of the countries with much more profit than would have been possible if they had operated under governments which acted as true guardians of the interests of their countries and their peoples.

It was, therefore, not at all surprising that the peoples in the new states ultimately became disillusioned with their leaders and increasingly dissatisfied with the political, economic and social conditions under which they lived. Since, in many of these countries the governmental systems had been radically changed to make it difficult, if not impossible, to change governments by democratic means, the only avenue available for change was the use of force. This was only available to the military which had in almost all cases been established and maintained in the traditions of the old colonial powers. Thus it was that power passed from the old political elites to the higher echelons of the military establishment. And, as the unavoidable corruption of unlimited power came to afflict the senior officers, they were also removed by middle-level officers who were in their turn replaced by even more junior officers. In due course, it became clear that no particular groups within the countries could resolve the nations' problems by themselves. It was also recognized that the failure to develop workable systems of government was not due to particular individuals but resulted rather from the absence of appropriate institutional structures. And it became more evident that these structures could only be developed in political systems which respected the rights of all elements of the community, and permitted them to participate in decisions which affected them. In effect, what was needed was greater democracy, not through the mere adoption of constitutional structures and procedures, but also by the general acceptance of the principle that political power derives from the people and is to be exercised for their benefit: that those entrusted with power should be genuinely accountable for their stewardship.

INFLUENCES ON THE CURRENT STRUCTURES

The current internal and international political structures in most of Africa, Latin America and Asia have been established, or in some cases remodelled, to respond to these demands. In most cases, the nature and orientation of these structures have been dictated by the historical experience of the peoples concerned, including the influence of the colonial past and the lessons learned from the successes and failures of other peoples in other countries. In addition the new or remodelled structures have been greatly affected by the exposure of these countries and their peoples to institutional structures operating at the international level. They have, of course, also been influenced by the challenges and opportunities presented by growing inter-dependence and globalization.

Global influences

The most important of the international structures have been the Charter of the United Nations and the constitutions of its specialized agencies and other organizations and institutions associated with the United Nations. One of the fundamental objectives of the United Nations is to “employ international machinery for the promotion of economic and social advancement of all peoples ...”. To this end the Organization is to seek to “achieve international co-operation in solving international problems of an economic, social, cultural and humanitarian character ...”.

The means for achieving these objectives are spelt out in Article 55 of the Charter. This affirms the commitment of the United Nations to “the creation of conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations”, by promoting, *inter alia*:

- a) higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development;
- b) solution of international economic, social, health, and related problems and international cultural and educational cooperation; and
- c) universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.

To achieve these common ends the United Nations is to be “a center for harmonizing the actions of nations ...”; and all Members of the United Nations “pledge themselves to take joint and separate action in co-operation with the Organization” for this purpose.

The countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia are member States of

the United Nations. As such, they are bound by these commitments not only in relation to their international relations with other states and entities but also with respect to the internal organization of powers and the distribution of resources and values between the various elements of their populations. In addition to the United Nations itself the States of these regions are members of the specialized agencies and they participate in the work of the large variety of bodies and programmes which constitute the United Nations system. Together these agencies, bodies and programmes impose on States major commitments in the economic, social, cultural, educational, nutritional, humanitarian, health and related fields.

When a State becomes a member of any of these organizations and programmes it accepts the obligation to contribute to the functioning of the organs and the progress of the activities of the organization or body concerned. But more than that, the Member State also makes a commitment that it will organize and regulate its conduct – in its relations with other States as well as in its conduct towards its own peoples – with due account of the common principles upon which the organization is based and the objectives which the members are required to promote – individually and collectively. Over the past decade or so the most important of these commitments have acquired increasing significance in the internal political structures of individual countries. For example, in the field of human rights, states are now required to fulfil in practice the undertakings made by them in the Charter of the United Nations and in declarations and conventions on various aspects of human rights such as the rights of women, children, refugees etc. What is more, compliance with international obligations is being monitored through institutions and procedures which make it difficult for governments to disregard their obligations in the way they were able to do in the past. Additionally, the new “conditionalities” developed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in their programmes of assistance to countries have brought the adherence to certain basic ideals of democratic governance, such as accountability and transparency in government and economic management, within the scope of the requirements expected of States which seek assistance from these bodies. Similar infusion of the international dimension into national structures and procedures has been accepted in the fields of environmental protection and the promotion of free trade.

Regional influences

In addition to the global international institutions a large number of international institutional structures, almost all of them based on the

principles and objectives of the United Nations Charter, have been established at continental, regional or sub-regional levels. Like the organizations of the United Nations system, these continental and sub-continental structures vary in their objectives: some are purely “political” in the sense that they seek to promote inter-state cooperation to solve general or specific political problems. But some of them deal with issues relating to special problems in the economic, social, health or humanitarian fields. These “sectoral” institutions bring together Governments to consider problems of mutual interest and establish common programmes or harmonize national policies for the achievement of agreed objectives. In this way the organizations can have an important impact on the conduct and policies of the member Governments, both in their relations with each other and also in the way they regulate matters internally in their countries.

In Africa the most important continental political organization is the Organization of African Unity (OAU). This organization, founded in 1963, brings together all the independent states of Africa in a common political forum for the consideration of every issue of mutual concern to the countries of Africa. In the Charter the Members affirm that “freedom equality justice and dignity are essential objectives ...” and they agree to pursue a number of purpose. Among these they agree “to coordinate and intensify their cooperation to achieve a better life for the people of Africa”. To achieve the agreed objectives they declare their adherence to a number of principles. Among these are:

1. The sovereign equality of all Member States
2. Non-interference in the internal affairs of States; and
3. Respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state and for the inalienable right of independent existence.

In addition to the OAU there are sub-regional institutions, mainly for the promotion of economic and social development. These include the Southern African Development Commission (SADC), the Economic Commission for West African States (ECOWAS) and the Magreb Council, to name but some.

The main continental organization in the Americas is the Organization of American States (OAS). It is worth noting, however, that the OAS is not strictly speaking a “Latin American” institution, since its membership includes also States in North America. In its Charter, the States of the Organization of American States proclaim the “fundamental rights of the individual without distinction as to race, nationality, creed or sex”. They also affirm that “economic co-operation is essential to the common welfare and prosperity of the peoples of the continent”. Like the Charter of the

OAU, the Charter of the OAS also stresses the importance of the sovereignty of its Member States, and prohibits interference in their internal affairs. Article 18 of the Charter specifically states that “no state or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatsoever, in the internal or external affairs of any other State”.

There is no continent wide structure for Asia, but there are a number of sub-regional organizations among which are the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation, the League of Arab States and the Gulf Co-operation Council.

Also worth mention in this context are the regional development banks which have been established in each of the three continents. These are the Asian Development Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank and the African Development Bank. These banking institutions are intended to do at the regional continental levels what the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and their affiliates do at the global level. The regional banks serve as the central focus to pool together the financial resources and expertise of the States of each continent and thus provide another source of assistance to supplement what the States may obtain from the global lending and financial institutions. A major advantage in having such a continental bank is that it is likely to be more in tune with the needs and requirements of the potential borrowing states. And, of course, they have the special attraction in that they also provide an opportunity and a mechanism of local self-help. Of late this aspect has lost much of its significance since the Banks now derive considerable parts of their resources from “non-regional” member States. All the Banks now extend membership to States from outside the respective continents, and these non-regional Members are able to contribute to the capital stock of the Banks and, in consequence, also to play a full part in the administration and management of the Bank.

It is also useful to refer to two major international structures in which many of the countries of the three continents do participate. These are the Non-aligned Movement and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. Unlike the more “functional” organizations, these serve mainly as fora where countries of the same orientation come together periodically to exchange ideas and, perhaps more importantly, to seek reassurance of the common bonds between them. On the whole these organizations concentrate more on the elements which unite their members and less on how the individual countries organize or govern themselves internally. For that reason, their impact on the institutional structures within individual member states is relatively insignificant.

POSITIVE IMPACTS OF THE EXTERNAL STRUCTURES

International structures, global as well as continental, have made an important contribution to the acceptance of the democratic hypothesis in the countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia. In the first place, they have provided much needed philosophical and doctrinal underpinning for the new political systems and structures established following the transition from colonial to the post-colonial era. Just as the declarations and manifestos of the French Revolution, the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States inspired political thinking and the development of democratic constitutions at the end of the eighteenth century; and as the writings and exhortations of Marx and Engels and the success of the Bolshevik Revolution in the Soviet Union served as potent models for many countries at the beginning of the twentieth century, the new political order promulgated in the United Nations Charter and in the constitutions of organizations based on the principles of the Charter have shaped the political process and ideas on economic management in all countries of the world after the second world war. Unfortunately, during the period of the cold war when the ideological battle between capitalism and socialism was in stalemate, the United Nations and its related agencies felt obliged to adopt an "even-handed" stance as between the two systems. But even then it was clear that their basic orientation was in favour of liberal democracy and individual liberties, as opposed to the subordination of the individual to the alleged interests of the community or state, without necessarily supporting capitalism and the market economy in their pristine forms. With the collapse of communism and the discrediting of the planned command-economy as a global model for development, even that ambivalence has disappeared. The primacy of the market economy as a necessary prerequisite for political and economic progress has now become part of the prescribed and received wisdom. In the process the ideals of the United Nations Charter have become the marks of orthodoxy and legitimacy for national constitutions as well as international associations, whether global or continental. Thus it is that nations and organizations have considered it obligatory and useful to make suitable references to the Charter and to incorporate its objectives and norms as their guiding principles. This has been so even in constitutions and organizations whose perceived purposes and actual operations have no discernible connection with the lofty ideas of the Charter.

In addition to serving as models for national and regional structures, the international institutions have provided a valuable benchmark by reference to which local and national structures may be evaluated to assess their conformity to accepted international norms and standards. In the field of democratic

governance, the principles of equity, equality and non-discrimination enunciated in the Charter of the United Nations and other international instruments have been invoked both by those who demand these rights at the national level as well as those who wish to persuade or pressure governments to grant these rights to their citizens or to sections of their populations. In the field of human rights the principles in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the covenants and agreements developed to implement the Declaration in specific areas have been accepted as constituting the agreed criteria for evaluating the human rights record of governments all over the world. And the work of the Human Rights Commission and other bodies of the United Nations dealing with various aspects of human and political rights have helped to put the spotlight on human rights abuses and humanitarian lapses in ways which were unimaginable only a few decades ago. It is, of course, true that these developments have been resisted and sometimes successfully frustrated by some Governments. And it is also the case that the extent and level of international action are still considered by some to fall short of what needs to be done. But it cannot seriously be denied that what has been done has had a beneficial effect and has served to advance the cause of democracy and human rights in areas where such progress would not otherwise have occurred.

Viewed from that perspective, it can safely be asserted that the advancement of democracy and the protection of human rights in the countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia have been assisted by international structures and the ideas behind these structures. This has been so not only because the structures have been duplicated in these countries but also because the operations of the international structures have, in many cases, served as powerful incentives to the governments to respect the commitments in their constitutions, and to operate the adopted structures in accordance with the fundamental spirit and intents behind them. Where these incentives have worked, the cause of democracy has clearly been advanced. But, even where total success has not been achieved, it has been much easier to call attention to the lapses and to hold those responsible to account. In other words, the existence of these international structures and their operations have led to general acceptance of the fact that there are no longer any "no-go areas" as far as the promotion of democracy and fundamental human rights are concerned.

SOME NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE EXTERNAL STRUCTURES

But not all the effects of the interface with international structures have been entirely positive. For these structures, and the ideas behind them, if

used without imagination and due regard to prevailing circumstances, can lead to distortions in the system of government and to conflict of ideas and values. This is especially the case in Africa and Asia where the new ideas of democracy, equality of treatment and non-discrimination are sometimes in direct opposition to traditional ways of thinking – usually based on religion or ingrained cultural attitudes. This has happened, for example, in relation to the dichotomy between the western liberal idea of the personal freedom of the individual, on the one hand and, on the other hand, the traditional values of the pre-colonial society which attached greater importance to the responsibility towards the extended family, the clan, the ethnic group or the community as the origin and justification of all rights. Similarly the ideas of tolerance of different religious beliefs, equal treatment of the sexes in all spheres of activity, recognition of the rights of persons with different sexual orientations etc. which are accepted in the west as essential hallmarks of liberal democracy, are considered with suspicion or even as wholly unacceptable in certain religious and cultural environment in Africa and Asia.

There is also the danger that international structures could be used merely as formal models without the real substance behind them. Thus it has been known to happen that so-called democratic structures and institutions have been established in countries where there has been little or no democracy in the actual situation on the ground. In such cases the structures, and the ideas and principles allegedly behind them, are used as a camouflage for a governmental system which does not afford real democracy or any respect for the political and social rights of the citizens.

Hence, while these internationally accepted procedures and the principles on which they are based can provide useful criteria for evaluating the democratic credentials of the governments and governmental systems of many countries, they may not be appropriate in all cases, and they could in fact be misleading in some. Indeed a number of commentators, especially from the west, have in the past been deceived into believing that democratic advance had been made in a country merely because of the existence of constitutional provisions or governmental institutions which are normally associated with democratic governance. As the history of the countries in the former communist world has shown, it is possible for citizens to live under political oppression even while lofty sounding democratic principles and declarations on fundamental rights are “entrenched” in their national constitutions.

A similar pattern of history has also developed in post-colonial Africa and Asia. The constitutions bequeathed by the departing colonial powers were invariably modelled on the western liberal democratic tradition and

included institutions and procedures intended to ensure that governments were the representatives of the electorate, that those in power were subject to appropriate checks and balances and that there were real possibilities for holding them to account for their actions. However, there is ample evidence that in many of these countries the constitutional systems which actually operated were radically different from what was envisaged in the constitutional documents which were promulgated at independence. And this was so even in cases where the documents were left in force with no significant changes. Their provisions and requirements were simply disregarded or re-interpreted in ways which bore no relationship at all to what was originally intended. Unfortunately many of the commentators, especially in the west, appear to have attached much more importance to form rather than substance. They, therefore, operated on the basis that whenever there were structures and procedures in place in a country, it could be assumed that those structures and procedures were being operated in the way in which they were expected to operate under truly democratic conditions. In adopting this attitude they helped to create the impression, in the minds of the governors and governed alike, that the formal structures are the most important criteria to be applied in evaluating political systems; with little or no regard to the way in which they were actually operated.

In the colonies legislative bodies established, often with token local participation, created the impression that there was a measure of representative government. In the same way the new dispensations under the civilian and military dictators adopted the outward forms of democracy (parliaments, elections, judiciaries and civil service described as “independent”), which led some to believe that there was a form of democracy in the systems they were operating. But these were only empty trappings and they did not in any way alter the fact that the regimes were in essence undemocratic.

This is especially so with the constitutional provisions regarding elections which seem to have particular appeal to western media and western academic and political commentators. In societies such as those in most parts of Africa, where all the levers of political and economic power are in the hands of those in government, and where the bulk of the electorate is illiterate with little or no long-standing acquaintance with the operations of liberal democratic systems, the mere inclusion of constitutional provisions affirming the right of all citizens to vote should not be taken necessarily to result in the election of governments which truly represent the people. Nor does the existence of an “independent” electoral body – or provisions for the monitoring of elections by foreign observer

groups – suffice to ensure that elections will in reality be “free and fair”. This is because the competitive advantage continuously remains with the incumbent candidate; and such advantage cannot in any way be affected by the presence of international monitors who arrive on the scene only at, or sometimes a short time before, the elections. In most African and Asian countries, almost every development project has electoral significance and is part of the campaign of the incumbent administration and its candidates for the support of those who benefit from the project. Similarly, appointments to political office or managerial positions in the very important public sector of the economy can be, and usually is, seen as a political gesture to the group, section or community from which the person appointed comes, and those communities are in turn expected to reciprocate by supporting the government.

It is important, therefore, to remember that truly “free and fair” elections can take place only when the electorate is sufficiently educated to recognize that those in power are no more than trustees of the nation in their management of the national resources. When the citizens who vote are able to understand that their vote is an expression of their own approval or otherwise of the policies and performance of the candidates, those who seek political power will see the need to convince the elector, instead of assuming that electors from one region or one group will necessarily support them.

Some unhelpful “principles”

Finally the impact of the internal structures on the development of democratic institutions may have been affected by one principle which appears to have been given unchallenged importance until quite recently. This is the principle that every state has the sovereign right to determine how it behaves within its borders, in particular with regard to the treatment it accords to its citizens. This principle which was proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations for understandable reasons, has been incorporated into the constitutions of several of the continental and regional organizations established in Africa, Latin America and Asia. For example, in the Charter of the Organization of African Unity, the principles to which Member States solemnly commit themselves include that of “non-interference in the internal affairs of States” and “respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each State and its inalienable right to independent existence”. Similarly the Charter of the Organization of American States provides in clear terms that “No State or group of States has the right to intervene, directly or indirectly, for any reason whatever, in

the internal or external affairs of any other state. The forgoing principle prohibits not only armed force but also any other form of interference or attempted threat against the personality of the State or against its political, economic, and cultural elements". The corresponding provision in the Pact of the League of Arab States asserts that "Each member state shall respect the systems of government established in the other member states and regard them as exclusive concerns of those states. Each shall pledge to abstain from any action to change the established systems of government".

The principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of States is, of course, one of the cardinal principles of the United Nations Charter. However, in the case of the Charter, the principle is counter-balanced by other provisions which impose obligations on Member States to ensure respect for fundamental human rights. Moreover, the very Article of the Charter which declares the principle also contains the important proviso that it "shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII (of the Charter)". Unfortunately, when it was incorporated into the constitutions of the various continental and regional organizations, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states was elevated to the status of a sacred precept which could not be questioned or qualified under any circumstances. This led governments to assume that what they did to their citizens in their territories was not the concern of any body or any institutions outside those countries. Similarly the people in these countries were made to believe that they could not expect help of any kind from outside in their struggle against oppression from their own governments.

It would not be far-fetched to say that this attitude on the part of the governments contributed significantly to the many serious abuses of the political process and violations of human rights which have taken place in so many countries in Africa, Latin America and Asia over the past three or four decades. For, once a government comes to believe that the actions it takes within its country will not be questioned or challenged from outside, that government will have no incentive to improve its behaviour internally, so long as it is satisfied that there can be no serious challenge to its actions within its territory. In such a situation, the only constraint on the government will be the force of opposition in the country itself; and it will take every step to stifle any such opposition.

For that reason an international structure or arrangement which is based on an unqualified principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states can have a negative impact on the development of democracy in the member states where democracy may be under threat. It must, of course, be admitted that the right to intervene in a sovereign state should

not be postulated lightly and should certainly be contemplated only in the most serious of cases and subject to very well-defined conditions. On the other hand, it is neither right nor necessary to create the impression that what goes on within national borders is not the concern of other states. In the present state of unavoidable inter-dependence between States in all parts of the world, it is necessary for the international community to make it clear that there are situations in which gross abuse of power or violations of fundamental political and human rights will not be allowed against any people-not even by the recognized government of the country concerned: that "where egregious and widespread crimes against life and human rights are being perpetrated", the traditional rule of non-intervention in the territory of a sovereign state can, and will, be suspended. Any such suspension of the principle should be carefully circumscribed and the criteria for its implementation in practice should be clearly set out and generally agreed. In particular, it should not be left to the unilateral determination of a particular state or group of states since, in that case, what is a desirable rule for the protection of community values might be utilized for the pursuit of national or sectional interest. But, without leaving it to individual states to intervene in other states, it should be possible for the international community, at the global or regional level, to devise means to ensure that serious violations of international principles on democracy and the protection of fundamental human rights are not permitted, regardless of where they occur and who may be responsible for them.

Recent positive developments

It is one of the most welcome developments in contemporary international relations that the international community, at the global as well as the regional level, has now given notice that no government or authority will be allowed to get away with gross violations of political and human rights, whether of its own citizens or the citizens of other states. This change in the attitude of the international community is bound to have a profound and highly beneficial impact on the development and enhancement of democracy, not only in the countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia, but all over the world. The reaction of the United Nations, NATO and the European political institutions to the events in former Yugoslavia showed that the international community is now willing to act to prevent serious violations of human rights and the consequential threat to peace and security; the reaction of the world body, and the regional states, to the events in the Gulf have provided clear evidence of the will of the nations of the world to intervene not only in cases of aggression

against other states but also in situations where sections of a national population are subjected to repression by their own government. And, finally, the actions taken by regional bodies in Africa, especially in Liberia and recently in Sierra Leone, have made it clear that no person or group will be permitted to disrupt the political process and deprive the people of any country of their fundamental right to live under a government of their own choice. This can only bode well for the future of democracy in those countries where the idea of democratic rights for the people had, until only recently, appeared to be an impossible dream.

AFRICA: A CASE STUDY

THE RECORD OF POST-COLONIAL AFRICA

After more than three decades of liberation from colonial and imperial rule, very few of the countries of Africa have managed to achieve either the democratic governance that was the objective of the demand for independence or the improvement in the economic and social conditions of their populations that was expected to result from the new dispensation in which the resources of these countries would be utilized in the interest of their peoples and not for the benefit of the colonial masters. For the most part the record of Africa, whether measured by reference to the progress of democracy or improvements in the quality of life of the people, has been disappointing and in some cases, catastrophic. Indeed for the most part Africa has become synonymous in the minds of many with despotic government, inefficient and corrupt administrations, lamentable human rights conditions and endemic poverty, and recurring humanitarian tragedies, many of which are man-made.

THE FAILURE OF DEMOCRACY

Much of the blame for this sad state of affairs can be attributed to the failure of the democratic experiment in Africa. All over the continent there has been little or no success either in the establishment of genuine and stable democratic institutions or the development of the "democratic attitude" in the minds of both the governing and the governed. With few exceptions governments were not put into office by the free choice of the people, nor do they hold themselves accountable to the people for their stewardship. In the vast majority of African countries political power is

uncontrolled and uncontrollable and the management of the national economy and the use of national resources are based on the dictates of the holders of political power. There are hardly any credible avenues through which those who are entrusted with the responsibility of government or management of the economy can be brought to account; and there are even less realistic possibilities for getting rid of those who fail to give satisfaction.

The traditional "democracies"

The failure of democracy and the democratic ideal in Africa is the result of a long heritage of governance in which the democratic hypothesis has almost always been absent. This heritage starts from the traditional governmental system of Africa prior to its colonization by the countries of the west. In spite of often disingenuous attempts, by some African "nationalists" and non-African apologists, to portray the indigenous African systems of Government as being some form of democracy, the truth of the matter is that these systems of government were essentially undemocratic, based as they were on the notion that the king or chief was the sole repository of what was politically legitimate, morally acceptable and legally possible.

All over Africa, from the Arab North to black sub-Sahara and the bantu south, one common thread runs through the traditional systems of Government: the king or chief held political, religious and military power, and his dictate was law and every act derived its validity and legitimacy from the consent of the chief – express or implied. It is true that the chief was expected to rely on the advice of his elders and that there were sanctions against the abuse of power by the king. But this does not detract significantly from the fact that the system was intrinsically undemocratic. For one thing the advisers of the king were either minor chiefs who exercised more or less similar despotic power in their smaller domains or officials appointed by the king and in most cases removable by him. In either case it was not realistic to expect that such people would give independent advice, much less that they would seriously stand in his way. The fact of the matter was that the traditional king held and exercised power which was uncontrolled and for the most part uncontrollable. When one remembers that the king was a hereditary ruler whose only legitimacy derived from the circumstances of his birth, that the majority of the people over whom he ruled had very little say in his appointment and even less in how he exercises his authority, it becomes clear that this was a far cry from the idea of a government of the people, by the people and for the people. This is not to say that it was not a workable system nor that it was not

suitable for the circumstances of the times. All that can be said is that, however suitable it might have been for the past, and however acceptable it was for the people at the time, it was not “democratic” in the sense in which democracy is understood in the context of developments since the end of the eighteenth century.

The contribution of the colonial experience

When the colonial administrators took over the colonies, they in turn introduced a system of government in which the governed had no say at all in the major decisions, and certainly could not pretend to have any right in determining who was to exercise governmental authority. Government in the colonies was on behalf of the Government of the metropolitan countries and the inhabitants of the colonial territories were expected to accept that the metropolitan government was the best judge of what was good for them and could be trusted to promote their interests in the best possible way. The colonial people were also required to accept that the officials who were actually exercising political power in their territories were the representatives of the benign and benevolent metropolitan government and, accordingly, that any challenge of what they did was a challenge of the authority of the metropolitan power itself. This meant that the actions of even the most humble colonial administrator were immune from criticism by the governed. In effect the colonial administration occupied, in relation to the ordinary citizens of the colonial territories, the same position as the chief had done in the traditional society. Like the traditional kings the colonial government went through the motions of establishing advisory councils to advise the officials and thus hopefully ensure that they took the views of the people into account. But again like the traditional kings advisers, the advisers chosen by the colonial governors were neither independent nor representative of the people whose interests they were supposed to promote. In the end the colonial government was a system in which the governed had no say.

THE TRANSITION FROM COLONIAL RULE

The transition from colonial rule followed more or less the same pattern. The constitutions under which power passed from the colonial powers to the governments of the new independence states were based on the democratic principles and the institutions established under these constitutions were all intended to ensure that power was exercised in

accordance with the applicable constitutional guarantees available to the people, individually and in groups, as the case might be. But the circumstances under which independence was either won or granted ensured that those who inherited governmental power would be virtually in the position in which the colonial administration had been, i.e. they could expect to govern with little or no opposition or effective criticism of what they did or the way they operated. This was the result of two tendencies.

The first was that the majority of the people of the newly-independent states had little experience with democratic government. Accordingly they were not accustomed to concerning themselves with the operations of governments or the behaviour of governmental authorities, especially where these did not directly affect their immediate interests or the interests of their close families or communities. But even where their interests were affected, there was generally the tendency for them to assume that the political leaders who had brought them independence knew what was best for them and their country and could, accordingly, be trusted with all the power they needed.

Secondly the new political leadership almost always came to power with the conviction that their mission was to develop and strengthen national unity in a new state made up of diverse ethnic sections, to safeguard the independence and territorial integrity of their new states, and to improve the economic and social conditions of people in a very short time in order to make up for the lost opportunities of the colonial era. To achieve this what was needed was a strong government that was able not only to run the administration but also to suppress any tendency to "undermine" the unity of the country. To this end they needed to harness and direct the talents and efforts of all the people for the common purpose of strengthening and developing the country. Such a government would not be possible if the citizens were permitted to propagate views and ideas on how the government and the economy were to be run which were contrary to those of the government.

THE POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE NEWLY INDEPENDENT STATES

In such a political climate, anyone who disagreed with those in power would be considered as undesirable and dangerous by the government and, hence, to be silenced or otherwise neutralized. And because the bulk of the population were either not particularly interested in general questions concerning the nature and purpose of government or the orientation of the national economy, or believed that what the benevolent government wanted

was also good for them, any critics of the government became isolated and thus more vulnerable to suppression by the government. This led, in many countries, to the emergence of the one-party state in which only one political organization was the sole source of political legitimacy and power. In some cases, this fact was given legal articulation in the revised constitutions. But even where this was not done, matters were so arranged that this was in fact the situation.

In addition to the complete hold on political power, the post-colonial administrations also exercised near-complete control over the national economies of the new states. Again this was the result of two converging tendencies. In the colonial period the economies of the countries were dominated by companies and interests based in the metropolitan countries in Europe. To the ordinary citizen in the colonial territories it was not possible to differentiate between the colonial State which exercised political authority and the commercial enterprises from the same state which dominated the economy. As far as they could see, government and the economy were dominated by the interests of the colonial masters overseas. Hence it did not sound strange or difficult for them to accept that, with independence and a new government, the economy should also be controlled by that government.

The second reason why governmental control of the economy became a feature of most post-colonial systems is that the new governments modelled themselves on the socialist paradigm that had been operated in the Soviet Union and its satellites after the end of the second world war. This was done on the basis of the generally held view that the Soviet Union had managed to move from a relatively underdeveloped economy to a world class industrial power in a very short time as a result of the combination of a one-party government and a socialist centrally-planned economy. The argument was that, if this combination had worked for the Soviet Union, it should also work for the newly independent states of Africa which had the same urgent need for a major transformation in a very short time.

As a result of the concentration of political power in the hands of the politicians in government and the total domination of the economy and economic activity by their government, the newly independent states of Africa developed a political system fundamentally different from the western model which had been envisaged for them at the time of independence. The system which actually operated in these countries allowed little room for dissent and offered hardly any opportunities to those who did not agree with the government to make any inputs to the political process. In effect the wheel had come full circle. For the absence of true

participatory government which had been one of the main objections to the colonial system, became also one of the major hallmarks of the post-colonial regimes in many of the countries of Africa.

This state of affairs continued for the best part of three decades – from the beginning of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s. For, although some of the political hegemonies were toppled generally by military *coups d'état* (the only way possible in a system of one-party dictatorships and no possibility of genuinely free elections), the military governments which were installed in their place were, by their very nature, equally undemocratic. And as the military also came to discover the attractions of the combination of political and economic power, they became more determined to maintain their grip on both.

Indifference of the west

Throughout all this the international community, and especially the western liberal democracies, appeared either to be unaware of what was happening in these countries or unable to do anything about it. In fact the situation was much simpler than that. The countries of the west had all the information about the nature and extent of the political despotism and economic mismanagement which were rampant all over Africa. The fact is that they found it convenient to refrain from asking questions, let alone seek to influence the situation for the better.

Two main reasons accounted for this attitude on the part of the western states. Some of the western countries, sometimes for well-meaning but ill-informed reasons, assumed that the denial of political and human rights in the new African states was necessary in the initial stages of nation building, and that these stages would be relatively short. Some others, for reasons based on perhaps unconscious paternalism, took the view that the principles and institutions of democracy could not work in the environment of Africa since the people were not “prepared” for them at the early stages of independence.

But, for the most part, the attitude of passive tolerance which was adopted by the west to political repression in Africa was due to the demands of the cold-war and the search for influence and strategic advantage in the global war between it and the communist world. In order to maintain the support of “friendly” governments in Africa, or to avoid driving not so friendly (non-aligned) governments further under the influence of the Soviet Union, the countries of the western alliance were willing to overlook the undemocratic practices of these governments. In some cases they were even prepared to explain or excuse flagrant abuses of

political and human rights by such governments. This was particularly the case with those governments which declared themselves to be “anti-communist”. For such governments it appeared that the only yardstick of acceptability was the genuineness of their support for the western alliance in its struggle for the hearts and minds of the countries of the so-called “third world”. This led to the situation in which the democratic countries of the west readily welcomed into the “anti-communist” camp very strange bed-fellows in the form of governments which were wholly indistinguishable from the communist regimes in the way they run their countries and their economies. Aid, largely military but also including important civilian components, was lavished on despotic and corrupt regimes which used the military hardware to terrorize their citizenry, and diverted the supposed development assistance either to enrich themselves or to support the political machineries established to perpetuate themselves in power. And it also came about that governments which had absolutely nothing in common in terms of political ideology or economic orientation were able to attract and maintain the support and patronage of governments which, in other contexts, were uncompromising in their opposition to the very practices which operated in the territories of these “friendly” states. The political and human rights of the peoples in many of the countries of Africa became pawns in the cold-war and their interests were sacrificed for the support (real or merely professed) of their governments.

THE END OF THE “COLD WAR”

With the collapse of communism and the discrediting of the socialist command economy as a dependable model for effective political and economic management, the situation underwent a very radical change. Decades of rule by governments which had claimed that the excessive powers wielded by them was necessary to ensure rapid development had not only failed to improve the standard of life of the people or effect any discernible reduction in the inequalities of income and life-style in their countries, but had actually led to the devastation of the economies of most of the countries and a major deterioration in the standard of living of the bulk of the populations. And the socialist system of government and economic management, which had been put forward as the best way to ensure economic development and equal treatment for all, had become clearly associated in the perception of many people with political repression, economic stagnation and blatant inequalities between the affluent few and the majority whose economic and social conditions continue to

deteriorate. In the end the people in the countries had become so disillusioned with the system of government by one-party or military dictatorships that they were no longer willing to support either. At about the same time, the international community, and especially the countries of the west which had been unable or unwilling to question the political oppression and economic mismanagement endemic in these governments, now felt constrained and enabled to take a more responsible position and to demand that action be taken to remedy the situation.

Similarly the international organizations, which had previously fought shy of any policies or actions that might be taken as a criticism of governments in the third world, became emboldened to scrutinize the policies and operations in these countries. In particular serious questions were now asked about the way in which the financial and other assistance provided by the organizations were being used by governments. In the process concerns were expressed about the economic orientations of the governments and attention was called to the fact that the lack of economic progress in many of the countries was due in large measure to the way in which the resources were being utilized and managed.

The new attention to "good governance"

But, for the first time, it was also noted that a major part of the problem was the nature of the political systems in these countries. It became increasingly clear that a regime which concentrated power in the hands of one group, which denied large sections of the population the opportunity to participate in the political process, which made it impossible or difficult for those who disagreed with the policies or methods of government to express themselves, in short, a governmental system which did not respect fundamental political and human rights of all sections of the population was also unlikely to be able to run an efficient economy. On this basis the respect for political and human rights was elevated to a much higher position in the discussions concerning development in the third world countries, not solely because human rights abuses were considered wrong in themselves but also because it was accepted that respect for political rights was one of the essential pre-conditions for real economic and social development. Accordingly, many of the international bodies engaged in the task of promoting and assisting economic and social development in these developing countries began to take much more serious interest in the political structures and the exercise of governmental power in the countries in which they operated. Indeed, for some of the organizations, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary

Fund, both economic policies and the system of political governance became part of the “conditionalities” (i.e. the criteria) for evaluating the suitability or otherwise of aid to particular countries.

As was to be expected, this approach was resisted by many of the governments on the ground that it constituted “interference” in the internal affairs of the countries. However, in the face of escalating economic difficulties in these countries and in the absence of any other alternative source of assistance, many of the governments were forced to accept the new conditionalities and to take steps, some genuine but some merely cosmetic, to introduce a greater measure of accountability and transparency into their systems of government and economic management. And before very long, countries which had previously insisted that their societies were unsuitable for “western” forms of democratic government were forced to accept the very forms of government and economic policies which they had totally rejected only a few years ago.

This change in the attitude of the international community – governments, international governmental organizations as well as non-governmental organizations – had a dramatic and positive effect in the countries. In the first place it obliged the governments to take some steps to liberalize political and economic life. But, perhaps more important, it gave new hope and impetus to the political opposition, which had been either banished from the countries, pushed underground or stifled altogether, to resurface with greater confidence and greater credibility. In the new atmosphere they were able at last to make meaningful inputs to the new constitutional structures which were being developed to bring greater democracy to the countries. For, while the governments felt constrained to reform the political process, they would naturally want to ensure, if at all possible, that such reforms would be more cosmetic than substantive. It thus became the role of the newly resurrected opposition to insist on genuine change and to demand that the new political system should be truly democratic in all aspects. With the support of the now more watchful international community, they have on the whole been able to secure significant improvements in the situation through the drawing up of constitutions which, at least in form and wording, represent a major advance for democracy in these countries. This has ensured that, in many of the countries, the new dispensation is much more democratic than the previous regimes. This has made the prospects of democratic governance in Africa much better today than they have ever been since the attainment of independence by those countries more than three decades ago.

THE FORCES PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

The improved prospects for democracy in Africa result from the existence of a number of factors in the current situation which tend to promote the development, spread and strengthening of democracy. Africa can only hope to consolidate and built on the achievements so far made if it is able to identify these positive factors and take the necessary steps to bolster them to the maximum possible extent.

PROMULGATION OF DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTIONS

Perhaps the most important of the forces in favour of democracy at this time is the existence of national constitutions which, for the first time in most of the countries, establish truly democratic institutions and provide for principles and procedures which ensure genuine accountability on the part of those in government, and give credible avenues for the people to exercise the right not just to participate in the election of political office holders but also to hold them to account for the running of the government and the management of the economy. In particular, they provide for the separation of the powers of the Executive, the Legislature and the Judiciary; they entrench fundamental human, political, economic and social rights of the citizens in the legal system; and they establish independent judiciaries as well as independent mechanisms for ensuring free and fair elections of the Executive and Legislature at clearly defined intervals.

It is true that, with very few exceptions, these institutions have not worked in the way expected. In many cases those in power have, sometimes openly and sometimes through subtle means, attempted to subvert the spirit of the constitutions by manipulating or intimidating the legislative and judicial institutions either to support legislative and administrative acts which are plainly contrary to the letter or spirit of the national constitution or to connive at such acts by failing to exercise the powers of oversight and control available to them under the applicable constitutions. Where the courts or legislatures have succumbed to such threats or blandishments from the Executive, the result has always been to enable the Executive to exercise power without the controls provided for in the constitution.

However, the existence of these constitutions is a significant move in the right direction, for such constitutions provide a clear frame of reference and a solid legal and political basis for challenging the actions of those in power and mobilizing the democratic forces against arbitrary rule.

INCREASED PUBLIC AWARENESS

Another factor which is helping to advance democracy in the countries of Africa is the increased awareness of the value of democracy among the peoples of Africa. This very welcome trend has been the result of a number of recent developments. First, the failure of despotic political and military leaders has led to disillusionment not only on the part of the peoples of Africa but also in the western countries which had previously adopted a tolerant attitude to these regimes, either because they falsely believed that there was no real alternative to such governments or for the more cynical calculation that it was easier to do business with undemocratic systems with relatively uncomplicated procedural requirements than with elected parliaments and representative cabinets. However, the inherently corrupt and inefficient nature of these administrations and, what is more important to the business community, the dangers clearly inherent in operating under a system in which stability could not be assured, have finally convinced many governments and business interests in the west that working with unrepresentative governments and un-elected officials is not as advisable or as profitable in the long run as they had previously assumed. This has led to less international support for such governments and, in consequence, deprived them of the claim that they alone can attract investment and business to their countries.

This process has been considerably assisted by “globalization” and the free flow of information and ideas from the developed world to the very corners of the African continent. In the days when governments were the only source of information for the ordinary citizens, the government could, through propaganda and censorship, get citizens to believe that conditions in their countries were not much worse than those obtaining in other places. The people could also be persuaded to accept that there was not much international interest in the problems of their countries and, accordingly, that the solution to such problems was solely in the discretion of the government of the country. In the absence of any information on the conditions in other parts of the world or any indication that the rest of the international community was interested in what was happening to them, the peoples of these countries could generally be expected to accept that their destinies lay exclusively in the hands of the government of the day. On that basis those who wanted change would only seek it through the government, and by means which the government was likely to tolerate.

However with the improvement in the global communication system, large proportions of the populations of Africa have come to know much more than their governments would have wished them to know. In this way

they have learnt much more about the achievements and failures of different forms of government and economic systems in other parts of the world and the standard of life in countries with different political and constitutional systems. They have also become aware of the growing interest of the international community in democratic governance and sound economic management, and the international support for democracy and human rights in the continent of Africa and elsewhere. This development has not only undermined the previously successful propaganda of governments, but has also given very potent incentives and encouragement to those who fight for democracy in these countries. In the past these persons were often discouraged by the fact that there was not much support at home for their efforts or much interest in their struggle internationally.

FORCES WORKING AGAINST DEMOCRACY

While the above-mentioned developments have certainly improved the prospects of democratic development in Africa, it is also a fact that their impact has been considerably reduced by a number of other less positive factors which still prevail in much of the continent.

POVERTY AND ILLITERACY

Perhaps the most serious inhibiting factor in the democratization of Africa is poverty and its almost ubiquitous companion of illiteracy. All over Africa levels of poverty exist which make it impossible for large sections of the population to maintain any real interest in issues relating to the forms of government or the organization of the national economy. When people are preoccupied with basic issues of nutrition, shelter, health and education, when they are unable to read and understand the most basic items of news on matters occurring within their own countries, let alone those on the international plane, it is unrealistic to expect that they will be particularly exercised by the activities of government officials or the operations of big business or organized labour. In that sense poverty and illiteracy reduce the pressure on government and administrations to be accountable for their actions and measures. And, of course, high levels of illiteracy mean that a larger proportion of the population are unable to benefit from the increased availability of information resulting from globalization and new information technology.

Poverty also makes it easier for those in power to manipulate the people. Where the bulk of the population is poor and illiterate it is less difficult for governing parties to attract unquestioning supporters from among those who have not much chance of advancement on their own merits. For such persons supporting the ruling party becomes an easy way of moving on, and the question whether they genuinely agree with policies becomes less and less important and relevant. And the more untutored and needy they are, the more are the chances that considerations of integrity and self-respect will be pushed further into the background.

In situations of wide-spread poverty governments and ruling political parties find it easy to “purchase” the support and votes of large sections of the electorate which come to consider development projects as “gifts” from the government and hence a good reason to support those who make such projects possible. And, of course, poverty affords to the candidates of the incumbent political parties the opportunities to seduce voters with monetary and other gifts at election time. Those who have only operated in the electoral processes of western democratic systems may find it difficult to appreciate the extent to which the results of elections can be influenced by the gifts which candidates are able to give to voters and to those who mastermind and organize their campaigns. Such an electoral process is a mockery of the concept of representative government, since it can only lead to the election of the highest bidder. It operates in Africa only because of the levels of poverty endemic in most of the continent.

THE PERVASIVE PRESENCE OF GOVERNMENTS

Another aspect of the political and economic situation in Africa which militates against the development of democracy is the pervasive presence of the government in the life of the people in the countries of the continent. In almost all countries the government control extends from the political and judicial bodies and institutions to the para-statal institutions which operate and manage what are referred to as “commanding heights of the economy”. This means that most of the procedures and processes which affect the daily lives of the majority of the citizens are either controlled, or at least significantly affected, by the actions and policies of the government. One result of the vast size and tremendous reach of government is that a very large proportion of the educated middle class is part of the official and semi-official bureaucracy, working directly for Government Ministries or for para-statal institutions. All such persons will, therefore, be dependent (with their immediate and extended families) on the income “from Government”. Additionally, the extensive involvement of the government in

many significant areas of commerce and industry increases the number of working people whose career destinies lie in official hands. Given the tendency of Governments to use their power in these fields to enforce allegiance (or at least silent acquiescence) from those who are employed in the public sector, many of these are not in a position to contribute effectively in the political debate. This is especially so because of the relative dearth of suitable opportunities for people outside the public sector. Anybody who is courageous enough to express opinions unacceptable to the government employer will find that there are no alternative sources of income, if he or she is victimized as a result.

The same goes for those in business and commerce. In many cases the ability to engage profitably in business can be severely limited or completely subverted by official antagonism or bureaucratic obstacles dictated "from above" for political reasons. This tends to make success in business and commerce dependent on the political opinions of the entrepreneur or at least his connection with someone with the ability and willingness to pull "political strings". In its worst forms, this can stifle business and commercial initiative and thus deprive the country of the benefit of talent which may itself be wholly non-political. At its worst it forces business people needlessly to involve themselves in partisan politics, merely to enable them to survive or to obtain services which should normally be available to all who meet the specified conditions. Businesses which succumb to the temptation to utilize political patronage are, of course, taking a risk; because any success achieved thereby becomes suspect and may be vulnerable to attack if and when the patronage disappears – because of a change either in government or in the political fortunes of the contacts whose influence helped to secure the patronage. But, perhaps the most undesirable consequence of governmental control and manipulation of commerce and industry is that it makes it difficult for persons in business and commerce to contribute meaningfully to discussions on political and economic policy. This is because those who are not willing to antagonize the government, and thus risk victimization in their business activities, will consider it prudent to refrain from expressing views on such matters if their views are not in line with the official position. In such a situation, the country is deprived of the views of perhaps the only people who are able to speak on these issues with a degree of relevant experience in the fields concerned.

THE ETHNIC FACTOR

Mention may also be made of the negative influence of the ethnic factor in the politics and administration of almost all countries of Africa.

Unfortunately nearly every country in Africa is beset by deep-rooted divisions between different ethnic groups who tend to be protective of their identities and group interests, in opposition to the interests of other groups or of the nation as whole. As may be expected this tendency is particularly strong in the relatively uneducated sections of the population. But it is unfortunately not entirely absent even with the most educated and otherwise sophisticated members of the professional, commercial and academic classes. It is also often exploited for political purposes by cynical and irresponsible politicians who do not have much to offer by way of serious programmes or creditable records.

The predominance of the ethnic factor in political discussion is one of the impediments to the development of democratic governance since it makes it difficult for political discussion to be based on argument and ideas rather than on emotive considerations of ethnic rights and ethnic representation in positions of power and influence. Where the ethnic factor is predominant it is almost impossible for issues of political organization and the management of the administration and economy to be discussed and evaluated on the basis of objective criteria or the independent judgement of the persons involved. This has many negative effects. It can stand in the way of the development of politico/economic ideas, movements on a truly national basis. This makes it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to bring together people from all strands of the society on the basis of their common belief in a set of ideas, as opposed to their membership of a particular ethnic group. In many cases persons of a particular ethnic group who do not share the prevailing political position in that group are considered as traitors to the ethnic cause. Those who are not strong enough to defy this trend either "fall in" in order to avoid the stigma of isolation or else choose to remain conveniently silent on matters on which they could have made a useful contribution.

One result of this concentration on the ethnic factor has been to prevent the development of truly national, as opposed to sectional ethnic, political parties in many countries of Africa. This has, in turn, led to the existence of a multiplicity of narrowly-based political parties whose unifying force is not a common set of policies but rather a shared culture or language or religion. Such parties tend to be neither large enough nor sufficiently cohesive to form the basis of a viable national government. Without such parties, democracy cannot expect to operate the way it should.

Finally the obsession with the ethnic criterion tends to produce situations in which appointments to high office may have to be based on ethnicity rather than on merit and personality. Such a system does not only

deny the country of the services of able people, but it also could result in the wrong persons being put in the wrong positions, sometimes with disastrous consequences for the function or enterprise in question.

CORRUPTION IN PUBLIC LIFE

Another feature of the African political and economic scene which works against the advance of democracy is the high incidence of corruption in government and the management of the national economy. Although the incidence of corruption in public life is by no means restricted to Africa, corruption is an undeniable feature of life in many parts of the continent and has a quite discernible impact on the processes of government and economic life.

There are many reasons for this phenomenon in the form in which it operates in Africa. The first is the very low returns of public service. In most African countries the levels of remuneration for persons holding positions in government (political or administrative) are very low when compared to the counterparts in the private sector. With the steady decline in the value of most national currencies, the purchasing power of the funds legitimately available to these people becomes less and less during their tenure of office. The result is that they are unable to maintain themselves solely on the income accruing to them from their positions. This makes them more easily susceptible to temptation. Indeed, for many of them, the fruits of corruption and the use of their influence becomes a necessary part of their income: in many cases this represents the most important part.

Another reason for the pervasive incidence of corruption in political life of Africa is that a very large proportion of persons who enter political life do so with little or no previous gainful employment or the qualifications for such employment. For such people political office is an opportunity (perhaps the first opportunity) to earn a living, and also to improve their standard of life. Since it is difficult for them to maintain a decent standard of living on legitimate income, it soon becomes essential for them to find other sources.

The need for extra income is made even more acute by other factors including, in particular, aspects of the culture of the communities. In much of Africa the extended family plays a key role in the lives of all but a few people, and this includes most of those who have acquired western lifestyles. While this system provides a much needed source of security and support for the less successful in the "family", it places a specially heavy burden on those who attain a measure of success. Since political office

always has a high profile, those who attain high political office automatically assume an elevated status in their societies, with consequential increase in their responsibilities to the members of the extended family and the wider community. This puts extra pressure on them and makes it more difficult for them to manage with the relatively low returns from the income legitimately available to them. The temptation to succumb to corruption becomes almost irresistible.

It is also worth noting that, for persons so hard pressed, yielding to corruption does not usually involve too much soul-searching. This is because there is in fact not much evidence of serious community objection to the use of public position to acquire personal gain or to assist members of one's family or group to obtain advantage. In many communities the member who makes a "quick buck" is considered to be "smart" and worthy of praise, while the one who sticks to the official income and ends with little to show for years in high position is deemed to be a simpleton or at best not sufficiently adventurous and, as such, not worthy of emulation. This means that, in spite of the public declarations in favour of probity in the exercise of public office, most people know that the acquisition of wealth from one's position is not in fact frowned upon by the society, and certainly not by the members of one's immediate or extended family. Thus one of the main incentives for honesty in the exercise of political and administrative office is seriously undermined by the cultural and economic conditions in which many politicians and public officials have to operate.

THE ABSENCE OF A FREE AND RESPONSIBLE PRESS

Another major constraint on the development of democracy in Africa is, of course, the nature and quality of the press and other media of mass communication and information. In many parts of the continent the press and other media of mass information are owned, controlled and in many cases abused by the government for partisan political advantage. In recent years there has developed a section of the press which is independent of the government. In many cases the independent press has been bold and enterprising enough to expose misdeeds and scandals in government, and to criticize the programmes and activities of the government and officials. But almost everywhere in Africa the independent press still operates with very serious handicaps. These include harassment by government through heavy handed laws, indirect subversion such as the denial of access to necessary facilities and in some cases open political pressure. The private press also has often to contend with draconian laws on private and criminal

libel, some of which are a relic of the laws with which the colonial administration sought to stifle dissent in the days before independence. Most of these laws are wholly incompatible with the democratic system of government proclaimed in the constitutions of the countries or the international obligations accepted by the governments under treaties and conventions.

In this connection it is also worth mentioning that some sections of the private press have, perhaps, added to their problems by the way they have sometimes operated. On occasions, some of them appear to have been carried away to seek sensationalism and possibly wider circulation at the expense of accuracy in news reporting or decorum in language. Much of this may be due to lack of training and over-enthusiasm on the part of some journalists. But whatever the reason may be, it is undeniable that the absence of a sense of responsibility on the part of any section of the press is bound to diminish its effectiveness and use to society. This is also true of the newly emerging independent press in Africa. Those who operate them must realize that their usefulness and effectiveness as watch-dogs on Government performance will depend to a considerable extent on the trust of the public in their integrity and the respect of the public for their conduct and methods. A free and effective press is an essential ingredient of any democracy. There can be no true democracy if one part of the press is not trusted and believed because it is regarded as a tool of the government, and the other part does not command the respect of the people because it is seen to be either irresponsible or not sufficiently dependable.

Another major defect in Africa's press set up is that, with few exceptions, the newspapers and journals tend to have clearly identifiable political agendas and are affiliated to particular political parties or tendencies. This makes their influence limited to only a section of the population and they will not be accepted as sources of unbiased information and enlightenment by those who do not share their political views. In many countries it is not easy to identify newspapers or journals which are recognized by the readers as relatively neutral as between government and opposition and whose views and comments on events can, therefore, be taken as based on objective analysis and impartial evaluation.

And there are even fewer journals whose main purpose is to educate and expand the horizons of their readers, as opposed to merely informing them of the events going on around them and in other parts of the world. While a major function of the press is, undoubtedly, to give the people the information that will enable them to understand and appraise the performance of governments, an equally important role of the press should be to help educate the people and broaden their social and mental outlook.

A press which fails to give adequate attention to this aspect of its mandate is not doing all that is legitimately expected of it. This is particularly so in Africa where there are very few alternative opportunities for the people to obtain this kind of service.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The character and orientation of the internal structures in Africa, Latin America and Asia have been dictated by a combination of the cultural and social backgrounds of the societies and the histories of the individual countries, including the experiences of the pre-independent colonial periods. With very few exceptions the backgrounds of these countries did not make it easy for them to adopt or operate genuinely democratic structures. As a result the governments which operated in the years immediately following national independence were essentially undemocratic, although there were variations in the ways in which the absence of democracy affected the lives of the peoples in the different continents, and in countries within the same continents.

However, international trends over the years, and especially since the end of the cold war, have had significant impacts on the development of democratic structures and the acceptance of the ideas and principles of democracy in most of these countries. In many cases this process has been assisted by international structures which have either served as models for adoption or adaption by countries according to their circumstances or provided useful benchmarks by which the performance of individual governments may be evaluated by their own citizens and also by the international community.

In Africa, the challenge of democracy has been especially acute because, in addition to the features which the African countries share in common with third world countries in Asia and Latin America, they have had to cope with special factors which have made it difficult for them to develop systems of democratic governance or to improve the living conditions of their peoples. In recent years there have been encouraging signs of progress in many of the countries of the continent. But a great deal more needs to be done.

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