

Polls and talks: Towards a restyled African leadership

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On September 11, 2008, Zimbabwe's leader Robert Mugabe and his political rival Morgan Tsvangirai reached a political agreement, thereby putting an end to an electoral dispute that started some months before. In late June 2008, when Mugabe was feeling at last the timid pressure from his African peers demanding the postponement of the 29 June one-horse race, he replied with a rather strong challenge that pushed the peers to the corner and rendered them speechless. Mugabe said: "We have never interfered in their domestic affairs. Never ever. And now we want a country which wants to point a finger at us and say 'you have done wrong'. I want to see that finger and see whether it's clean or dirty". None of the African leaders who were all getting ready for the 30 June – 1 July 2008 African Union summit in Egypt, reacted to that challenge. Six months before, a situation almost similar to Zimbabwe's had occurred in Kenya, where the electoral process ended with two self-proclaimed winners who reached a power sharing agreement after bloodshed. Are polls still the only way to get or stick to power or are post-electoral talks becoming the standard? Are these failed electoral processes heralding a new leadership style in Africa? Are current constitutional reforms granting life presidency and a worriless retirement part of that new era? Or is this just a temporary crisis that will not stop the democratisation process that started in the early 1990s?

The new African leadership era is characterized by one allegedly democratically elected leader who imposes himself at all cost as the key political player; constitutional readjustments that fit the leader especially by removing the term limitation obstacle and guaranteeing a worriless retirement; the annihilation of opposition parties; poll rigging; support from the continent; and power-sharing negotiations if the situation goes out of hand. The Zimbabwe and Kenya cases are good illustrations and seem to be inspiring other opposition leaders in other more stable countries. John Atta Mills, the opposition presidential candidate in Ghana's November [2008] election stated in January that year that 'the similarities in the unfortunate situations in both Ghana and Kenya are too glaring to be ignored, especially as there is a high probability of their repetition in our forthcoming general elections'. Atta Mills and other opposition leaders are more and more convinced that incumbents are not ready to leave and that the presidential seat is attributed not by voters but through a two-man power-sharing talk.

The July 2008 constitutional readjustment in Rwanda is another example. The revised text provides that the president of Rwanda will never be pursued by any court after leaving office. This amendment is tailored on President Paul Kagame's own situation as he is at risk of being added to the list of Rwandan military wanted by the French and Spanish justice for criminal allegations. Earlier that month, the very AU summit that tacitly recognized President Robert Mugabe, rejected the arrest warrants issued by the French and Spanish judges against top ranking Rwandan military.

Similar support was offered to Sudan president Omar El Beshir who is at risk of prosecution by the International Criminal Court. President Beshir will likely follow Kagame's path and

put in place legal instruments preventing his prosecution. The biggest worry is that African leaders are forming a continental coalition for self and mutual protection. Addressing the Afro-Arab Festival in Kampala, Uganda in mid-March 2008, Libyan leader Muammar el Qaddafi, suggested that outstanding leaders like Yoweri Museveni and Robert Mugabe “should stay in power until they have solved all the problems in their countries or die while still in power”. On their turn, they would most logically support Qaddafi’s life-presidency and any other move if needed. Supporting Beshir and Kagame in their judicial misfortunes is securing support in advance for days and years ahead. Former Liberian President Charles Taylor’s arrest and trial pushed serving leaders to be cautious and devise self and mutual-protection instruments. Taylor was the most unfortunate as he made the mistake of being in open conflict with almost all his neighbours. He could secure no support from far away when next-door neighbours were complaining about him.

Mugabe’s case was different. Neighbours – except Zambia - were almost unconditionally his natural allies due to the common liberation struggles that Mugabe still embodies. Malawi never had that kind of struggle and thus should be less prompt to support Mugabe. Instead of that, president Bingu wa Mutarika lacked appropriate words to praise Mugabe. He was ‘impressed that no external force was applied and citizens have been given full opportunity to do what they want’ The restyling of African leadership is also bringing to the surface old behaviours and practices. Like Zaire’s Mobutu Sesse Seko, Rwanda’s Juvénal Habyarimana and many other who used to win close to 100 percent of votes, Kagame is still expecting a 100 percent score in the 21st century democratic Africa.

The re-defining of African leadership is attributable to the false start of the multi-party era in the early 90s. While Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania and Benin, to name a few, succeeded in turning the single-party page, others adopted some form of dominant party, which is not so different from the single-party system. The current fashion – the one I termed new African leadership style – is to use that dominant position to impose self-tailored rules that most peers from the continent will validate and even imitate. Success stories like Joachim Chissano’s, Nelson Mandela’s, Mathieu Kerekou’s are not inspiring serving leaders, while the adventures of Mwai Kibaki and Mugabe are making adepts continent wide.