

Why have there been so many despotic governments in Africa?

Firoze Manji, 2014.

"Why have there been so many despotic governments in Africa since independence - is there something about Africa that leads to undemocratic regimes?" This was a question I was asked recently during an interview on Sahara TV. Well, there's no getting round it, Africa has had its share of despotic regimes, but then so have many other former colonies in Asia and Latin America. So why has this happened? At heart, I think it is because many independence movements sought to occupy the colonial state rather than to transform it.

The early 1950s witnessed an extraordinary sweep of popular mobilisations across the continent inspired by aspirations for emancipatory freedom - an end to the colonial yoke. Across the continent, nationalist parties convinced people that the path to freedom was through political independence. On coming to power, most of the governments believed that all that was required to satisfy the demands of the masses was to take control of the state. But what they ignored was that the state was a colonial state, one that was set up to serve, protect and advance the interests of imperial power and its entourage of corporations and banks. That state had a monopoly over the use of violence. It had police forces, armies and secret police and it had used force and, where necessary, violence, to protect the interests of the way in which capitalism operated in the peripheries. To what extent could such machinery be used to deliver the freedoms that the mass movements craved?

Adopting the colonial state

Faced with the existing state machinery, independence governments largely sought to make modest reforms to the colonial state. This consisted primarily in deracialising the state and modernising it so that the economy could be more fully integrated with the new, emerging international order that the US, Europe and Japan were busy creating in the post-World War II period. The structures of state control, the police, army, and special forces, even the structures and powers of native authority established by colonial powers, all these were left fundamentally intact, albeit now dressed up in the colours of the national flag. Even the way in which the identity of citizens was defined by colonialism was left unchanged. As Mahmood Mamdani has argued, where colonial powers had ordained that a group was indigenous, they were defined as being a tribe, whereas if they were ordained to be non-indigenous, they were defined as a race. The repressive arm of the state was left intact, even if, as in some cases, that required the absorption of the armed wings of the liberation movements into the existing army (and not the other way round).

The same story was repeated more recently in South Africa in the post-1994 era. Instead of dismantling the apartheid state, the ANC sought only to occupy it and conduct the modest reforms that other nationalist movements had done elsewhere on the continent. As one senior veteran of the liberation movement was heard to quip in 1994: "Apartheid is like the scaffolding around a building. Scaffolding is needed when constructing the building; once it has been completed, the scaffolding is no longer required and can be removed. The building is now ready for the ANC to occupy!" While the repressive arms of the state may be dressed in new uniforms, their role - that of protecting the interests of capitalism in the former colonies - remained unchanged. And as the emerging middle class and party officials that now occupied the neo-colonial state realised the potentials for private accumulation and looting that access to the state provided, so their interest in transforming the state waned.

The growing presence of transnational corporations and international financial institutions provided endless, lucrative opportunities for them to even consider making changes to economic power. The state as honey-pot became a terrain of conflict among different factions of the elite.

Resistance to dispossession

Social protest, independent political organisation, and any movements that challenged these trends in the post-independence period were frequently met with repression. The situation has potentially become worse with the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

Protests against the wide-scale accumulation by dispossession, dispossession of land, jobs and the living wage were faced with repression. In conditions where the minority rich gets richer and the majority gets poorer, the (capitalist) state always acts to protect the interest of the rich. Inevitably, we witness increasing use of repression: The way in which the South African government dealt with the striking miners in the Marikana platinum mines, or the way that protest movements were violently suppressed in Djibouti, are just some examples.

Amilcar Cabral, the leader of the liberation movement of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (PAIGC) and one of the leading revolutionary thinkers in Africa, did not think that independence movements could take over the colonial state apparatus and use it for their own purposes. It wasn't the colour of the administrator that was the issue, he argued, but the fact that there was an administrator. "We don't accept any institution of the Portuguese colonialists. We are not interested in the preservation of any of the structures of the colonial state. It is our opinion that it is necessary to totally destroy, to break, to reduce to ash all aspects of the colonial state in our country in order to make everything possible for our [people](#)."

Sadly, those like Cabral in Guinea-Bissau, Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso, Patrice Lumumba in Congo, and many others who understood the need to transform the state, were assassinated before they were fully able to establish alternative popular organs of state power.

However, their legacies are increasingly evoked by new emerging movements against despotism as we have seen, for example, in the mass uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt that led to the overthrow of Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, in the Y'en a Marre (we've had enough) uprisings in Senegal that mobilised to a dynasty being established, and in many other countries across the continent about which I have written [elsewhere](#). In the early months of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, people began holding mass meetings where decisions were made about security, food, health care, social provisions and care that were based on popular consent and participation. These were the beginnings of processes that signalled the potential of alternative forms of state power. While there have been downturns in the revolutionary process unleashed during 2011, especially in Egypt, it is likely that we will see in the coming period the emergence of debates around whether the existing neocolonial state structures that are designed to protect and advance the interest of transnational and finance capital, can meet the needs of the majority of people.

Firoze Manji works with ThoughtWorks as director of the Pan-African Baraza. He is the founder and former editor-in-chief of Pambazuka News. He is the editor, with Bill Fletcher Jr, of ***Claim No Easy Victories: The Legacy of Amilcar Cabral***.

[<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/07/despotic-governments-africa-2014728125216648975.html>]