

Democracy 's Ragged Salesmen

BY HAKEEM BABA-AHMED

“Examine the cloth worn by the man who promises to dress you up”. African proverb.

The coup d'état in Niger Republic is re-focusing bright light on an awkward debate that had existed on the fringes of academic discussions on the utility and viability of the democratic system outside regions which had sustained it for long periods. It appears that there are still remnants of resistance against a version of African history which challenges its own interrogation. This resistance has resurfaced in patches, reinforcing support for non-democratic regimes gaining numbers with Niger Republic in West Africa. Its ranks are bolstered by intense propagandists clad in African garbs but focused on replacing the continent's old masters. Another phase in scramble for Africa is opening. Old masters are losing ground, swamped by their own weaknesses and the rise of potential new powers whose credentials are not entirely inspiring as models or partners for Africa, a continent with the biggest potential for greatness and the brightest prospect for sustained decline going by its current trajectories in a world which punishes weaknesses.

When, in 1876, Africa was carved out in smoky rooms in Brussels by leaders of European powers and mercantile interests, a new chapter was opened which gave a few of them complete control over African people and resources. It was also the end of centuries of slave trade and slavery, an event that depopulated Africa's young and strong and moved them to do the heavy lifting for the foundations of prosperity of the USA and the Americas. By the beginning of the last century, Africa laid bare before a few European countries with the technology, force and hunger to turn it into a source of different plunder. Lines were drawn all over the continent in a scramble that had no respect for history or cultures. At this time, the USA was busy building a capitalist economy on blood and sweat and land of indigenous people, Africans and poor white. China was struggling with forces that held on to the ancient against marauding new powers from a new world it did not know. Russia was bursting with maturing internal contradictions that will give birth to the Bolshevik revolution. The rest of the world was inexorably moving towards the triumph of capitalism and a scientific and technological revolution, either as beneficiaries or victims.

Most of Africa settled under conquest and re-design of a few Europeans. They were not all operating with the same manual on keeping Africans under control, and none had



long-term plans over the future of new possessions. Once control of Africans was established and lines of exploitation were established, colonial powers defined their ideas on the future of colonies. Portuguese saw them as extensions of Portugal, possessions that were meant to be eternal. French saw them as sources of wealth and territories which could be kept under control by making educated Africans French. The British got the Africans to do the tough job of keeping the native under control while it milked his energy and obedience. Much happened in 60 years of colonialism in Africa. The colonized and colonizer both knew new arrangements had become necessary. The British saw the signals and installed a largely acquiescent African elite to sustain an exploitative relationship that was built under full colonial rule. The French designed a policy that allowed Africans to govern, while sustaining the basic framework of the colonial control of the colonies' economy. The Portuguese had to be chased away by armed struggle.

History will record that the country that fought a war to free itself from British colonial rule, the USA, sat on the face during Africa's anti-colonial campaigns, struggling to come to terms with a history which had created its own angry and impatient large black population and a

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disposition towards Europe's fortunes in Africa. The oldest modern democracy, France, had smeared its history with Africa. When Germany threatened to chart a different course from the rest of Europe by becoming the master-nation, Africans were drafted into the masters' battles. They performed with distinction, then learnt all the right lessons from the brutal wars which demystified the racial component of colonial rule. The only difference between the white and the black man was the gun in the hands of the white man. If the black man arms himself, the days of his subjugation were over. This quickened but did not end the domination of the black man by the white man. What did that was the idea that the African should ape the values, systems and basic institutions of his master, now robed as a respected equal. Grooming leaders who should sustain the colonial master's political and economic systems took a few decades in most of Africa, except in a few colonies where the colonizing power did not envisage departing under any circumstances.

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instability and insecurity. Still, the former colonizer was available for business. On occasions, he planned and executed the replacement of leaders. Africa sank deeper into poverty and conflicts. An assortment of its 'leaders' routinely plundered its assets and invited strangers to plunder even more. Little attention or interest was paid to the irony that the former master is today's champion of democracy and the architect of a grossly unfair world economy with Africa as chief victim.

It could have gone on forever but for the emergence of new, stronger developments. Challengers with little respect for history are now making aggressive inroads into former strongholds of a weakening Europe. China, Russia and a host of middle-level powers are not asking questions about credentials on democratic governance. The US had got its fingers burnt in too many quarrels with parts of the world that just won't fall in line. Its current politics is a textbook reference on how democracies can go wrong. Younger Africans only read about the promises of freedom, and now want the good life in Africa or Europe, despite the rising barricades. The French mystique in much of West Africa has faded, and populist versions of history insists that France will not let go of Africa without sinking. African democracy has settled into routine and violently contested elections, and it is good enough for developed democracies, so long as it does not set the store on fire. No, one has successfully demonstrated the linkage between development and democracy to a point that holds back massive resentments and high expectations. The trick is to convince Africa that it has no alternative to democracy. The problem is that this task has been badly damaged by history and is being peddled by dubious salesmen.