

This text is based on the following document: "Political Culture and Democratic Governance in Southern Africa" by Khabele Matlosa. Paper presented in African Journal of Political Science, Vol 8, No 1. June 2003. African Association of Political Science.

Africa needs more than liberal democracy

■ Khabele Matlosa, political scientist from Lesotho, argues that the discussion on democracy and governance in southern Africa has been too focussed on elections, electoral systems and the strength of institutions, while issues related to the political culture have been ignored. The main thrust of the article is that a culture of political violence and instability in the region is explicable in terms of the structural make-up of the region's political economy and not so much by the level of institutionalisation of governance itself.

Matlosa's conclusions are in brief that the political transition in Southern Africa since the 1990s has steered the regional states towards democratic governance. This has enhanced political participation, improved the democratic culture and political stability in Southern Africa. However, he argues, liberal democracy is insufficient for the kind of democratic culture and practice that the SADC region needs.

Instability and democratic governance – the theories

Two schools of thought in the debate of instability-governance nexus are institutional-functionalism and structuralism. The former explains instability and political violence by focussing primarily, if not exclusively, on the in-

terface between the level of institutionalisation of the state and the degree of political participation by the citizenry. The latter gives pride of place to the structural configuration of society and constant contestation over state power, resource distribution and social stratification based on identity and ideology.

Samuel Huntington is mentioned as the main proponent of the institutional-functional school. It explains instability and political violence in developing countries with rigid, simple, subordinate and fragmented state institutions under conditions of high political mobilisation and participation of the citizens.

A post-modernist institutional-functional paradigm of political crisis in Africa has been advanced by Patrick Chabal and Jean-Pascal Daloz. They argue that what all African states share is a generalised system of patrimonialism and an acute degree of apparent disorder, as evidenced by a high level of governmental and administrative inefficiency, lack of institutionalisation, a general disregard for the rules of the formal political and economic sectors, and a universal resort to personal and vertical solutions to societal problems.

Matlosa argues that both the modernist and post-modernist institutional-functionalism approach reduces the heart of politics in Africa merely to institutions and how they function and respond to political mobilisation. It thus fails to capture the role of political culture and other actors in

As part of Swedish development co-operation, Sida supports the strengthening and development of research capacity in the South and the promotion of research of central importance for sustainable development and poverty reduction.

Many of the research results in the South are published in books, conference reports and journals which have limited circulation in the OECD-countries. To a certain extent they are available on the internet. However, in the North this research is normally known only to a small group of researchers, and unknown to a wider audience.

To remedy this deficiency, Sida's Department for Research Co-operation, SAREC, intends to publish briefs based on publications from Sida-supported social science research networks. During a pilot period, the focus will be on research from Africa.

The briefs will be written by both SAREC and external staff in their individual capacities and areas of responsibility. They will go beyond the "executive summary" concept, as they will also contain some reflections on relevance and potential use in Sida's and Sweden's policy discussions and development co-operation practice.

It may be argued that at least some of the briefs have already been published by the African networks, and that therefore a special series of this kind is unnecessary. Our point of view is that both the selection of material and the reflections included make it easier for the reader to position the research in a Swedish policy context.

I hope that the series Perspectives from researchers in the South will be read by colleagues working with global development as well as others with an interest in these issues. I also hope that the series will inspire readers to study the original documents. If the response is positive, we may broaden the scope both geographically and topically. Feedback is welcome!

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Berit Olsson

Director of SAREC, Sida's Department
for Research Cooperation

the political system in moulding the state and how it undertakes the task of managing national affairs.

He argues that this approach does not acknowledge the importance of power, resources and identity/ideology and that therefore the structuralist paradigm is a more useful approach. This centers on a triangle of conflict comprising a) contestation over state power, b) struggle over distribution of resources and c) social stratification and diversity premised upon identity, gender, and ideology. This approach recognizes that African politics center principally around state power, hence the fierce contestation over the state as an end in itself. Claude Ake and T. Lumumba-Kasongo are mentioned as representatives for this approach.

From one party system to liberal democracy

Immediately after political independence of the 1960s, a number of Southern African states adopted the one-party system under the guise of the ideology of developmentalism and nation building. This was a particular type of political culture that was dominant in the region for over three decades. It was an authoritarian political culture. The justification for the one-party political system revolved around the following:

- The quest for national unity to ensure national consensus, nation-building and political stability following political independence.
- The ideology of developmentalism which geared attention and energies towards economics and de-emphasised (multi-party) politics.
- Pervasive perception of one-party as a truly African democracy, deeply rooted in pre-colonial political tradition and history and thus justifiable as an indigenous political system.
- The widespread belief that the Western multiparty system was alien to the African political setting.
- The assumption that differences and divergence in political opinion would be assured through what African leaders called opposition from within

the party. Hence the short-lived politics of accommodation which was quickly replaced by politics of patronage and repression.

The 1990s witnessed significant changes in the mode of governance in Southern Africa. Political centralisation, which had pervaded the region assuming various forms such as one party system (Tanzania), one person system

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(Malawi) and military rule (Lesotho), has increasingly been replaced by political liberalisation. This essentially represents a new set of political culture in the region which emphasises pluralism as against centralisation of power. Before the end of the Cold War a majority of the regional states adopted economic adjustment programmes through which economic liberalisation and political liberalisation are supposed to be implemented in tandem. Many aid donors to Southern African states also imposed stringent political conditionality to their development assistance, including political pluralism and regular multi-party elections.

The head of UNRISD, Thandika Mkandawire, labelled countries in this situation “choiceless democracies”, who have to accept the conditionalities of policies concocted by international technocracies.

Matlosa argues that this process has led to a legitimacy crisis of the state, which has responded to social demands of the citizens through repressive measures.

At the regional level, the demise of apartheid in South Africa was a crucial factor for the region’s transformation from authoritarian rule. It led to majority rule in both Namibia and South Africa and sustainable peace in Mozambique. It was also accompanied by internal political pressure in a majority of Southern African states for democratic rule and democratisation mounted by civil society organisations. Despite their weaknesses and disjointed organisation civil society actors have contributed to the emergence of multi-party political pluralism in the region. Media has also liberalised and become more pluralistic.

Liberal and social democracy

Some scholars have questioned the relevance and utility of liberal democracy in Africa, and argued for adoption of social democracy as a better system that could deepen democratic governance, among them Claude Ake and T. Lumumba-Kasongo. Such social democracy is premised primarily upon close cooperation among the state, capital and labour in the process of governance. It thus lends itself to broader participation and empowerment of the citizenry than liberal democracy.

The three basic elements of liberal democracy are:

- A meaningful and extensive competition among individuals and organised groups for all effective position of government power, at regular intervals and excluding the use of force.
- A highly inclusive level of participation in the selection of leaders and policies, at least through regular and fair elections.
- A high level of civil and political liberties.

According to Matlosa it is important to note that the neo-liberal democratisation process in Southern Africa is driven more by the ruling elite with insignificant impact of opposition parties and minimal contribution of civil society organisations. This point is significant, as it explains in part the current entrenchment of dominant party system in the region despite regular elections. In Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe up to year 2000 the governing party has more than 2/3 of the parliamentary seats. This undermines the checks and balances among key institutions of government. In a majority of states the dominance of the ruling party approximates a de facto one-party state without effective opposition entrenched in parliament, large majority party regimes share some of the weaknesses of one-party systems. The hegemony of the ruling parties in both the legislature and the executive give impetus for their undue influence and control over the judiciary as well.

The dominance is enhanced when the opposition parties are small or divided, are poorly endowed with re-

sources and receive little or no public funding as well as little or no access to national media. On top of that they are often harassed by the state authorities. This means that opposition parties often depend on external sources for their funding, which tends to compromise their national agenda and image. Finally the lack of inner-party democracy and the entrenchment of the personality cult around the leader of an opposition party have contributed to the weakness.

The electoral system used in many SADC countries further exacerbates the domination. It is based on the British model of Single Member Plurality system, in which the winner takes all in their constituencies.

Matlosa argues that proportional electoral systems are providing better conditions to avoid that armed conflicts resurface after they have been ended once. Mozambique, Namibia and South Africa are examples. Proportional electoral systems have shown to be more including, representative and participatory than Single Party Plurality system.

Matlosa concludes that under conditions of the pervasive culture of dominant party system, elections have provided voters with a limited menu for choice of national leaders and electoral systems have facilitated prolonged and uninterrupted rule by dominant parties.

The importance of decentralisation

Democratic governance entails empowerment and political participation of the citizens to influence and shape the policy making process at both central and local levels. Thus the establishment and institutionalisation of democratic local government is part of the agenda for the wider democratisation process and political stability. Local government denotes a transfer of power and authority from central government to lower-tier public institutions. This is essential for democratisation.

While centralisation of state power and authority has been the hallmark of the authoritarian era of the one-party political culture, the current era of democratic governance must be premised upon decentralisation, according to Matlosa. He defines four important

variants of decentralisation: a) de-concentration, b) devolution, c) delegation and d) privatisation. Whereas de-concentration refers to the transfer of authority(not power) and workload from central to lower-tier levels, devolution entails a transfer of both authority and power from centre to statutory, autonomous local authorities. Delegation simply entails a horizontal and vertical distribution of decision-making authority to local and regional agents of central government. Privatisation denotes the transfer of functions, authority, power and management of a public enterprise to individuals or privately owned companies.

Conflicts and democratisation

One of the major challenges and threats to the on-going democratisation process in Southern Africa relates to the conflicts of various forms that mark the region's political landscape. Conflict is part of social change in all societies and as such it is not necessarily a negative phenomenon. Conflicts become destructive and counter-productive once they escalate into violence. It could be argued, therefore, that the major problem facing the region is not so much that there are conflicts but rather that no effective regional mechanisms have been built for constructive management of the conflicts. Major violent conflicts in the region are propelled and driven by contestation over state power, distribution of resources and cleavages based on ideology and social identity.

Matlosa notes that at the national level a majority of the states operating the proportional representation electoral system have held elections under political condition marked by stability, while those that have adopted the First-Past-The-Post system have experienced considerable instability.

A social democracy in Southern Africa

The political transition in Southern Africa since the 1990s in particular has steered the regional states towards democratic governance. This implies positive developments for enhancing political participation, democratic culture and political stability. However, controversy still surrounds the

relevance, form and content of the democratic model that most regional states have adopted. To what extent is western liberal democracy a sufficient political model for enhancing political participation, deepening democratic culture and ensuring political stability in Southern Africa?

The minimal representation provided by liberal democracy and the exclusionary tendencies of the dominant electoral system have had limited impact in containing conflicts and ensuring stability in a majority of countries. Profound constitutional reforms are required in order to strive towards some form of developmental/ social democracy in the region and efforts made so far by Namibia and South Africa in this direction are encouraging, argues Matlosa.

Based on Claude Ake, he provides a list on characteristics needed for a democracy suitable for Africa:

- A democracy in which people have some real decision-making power over and above the formal consent of electoral choice (powerful legislature, democratic local government, etc.).
- A social democracy that places emphasis on concrete political, social and economic rights as opposed to emphasis on political rights by liberals.
- A democracy that puts as much emphasis on collective rights as it does on individual rights.
- A democracy of incorporation and power sharing which ensures as much participation, inclusivity and representativity as possible.

Matlosa argues that this means that the pre-requisites for democratic governance and political stability in Southern Africa include:

- A strong state
- Vibrant competition between parties
- Vibrant and resilient civil society
- Strong endogenous entrepreneurial class with effective control over economic governance
- Controlled markets for private sector operations
- Regional integration that transcends economic cooperation and strives toward political cooperation.

Comments

Matlosa contributes to a discussion that has been going on for a long time. As I see it, he tries to bridge the gap between the liberal and a structural form of democracy. He does this by accepting the important steps forward that has followed the introduction of liberal democracy, arguing that it has to be deepened further in order to fit with the political culture of Southern Africa and Africa in general.

Particularly important is the discussion on why the multi-party election system has turned into "dominant party system" in so many countries in Southern Africa – as well as

in the rest of SSA. Based on Matlosa's discussion regarding the advantages of the proportional electoral system, it could be argued that there is a significant improvement to be made already within the liberal democratic system.

If, and in that case how, to adjust the liberal democratic model to African political culture has over the years been a contestable issue, and the issue should not be wiped away as irrelevant.

The optimal balance between political rights on one hand and social and economic rights on the other, and between individual and collective rights in an African context is interesting also from the perspectives

based on Sida's multidimensional poverty concept and the rights perspective of the Swedish Policy for Global Development.

One important difference between the liberal democracy and its election processes and institutions and what can be termed African political culture is the view on political opposition. Many of the more authoritarian regimes regard political opposition and critique against the government as critique of the nation and the repression is often hard. This is facilitated by the dominant party's strong control of the executive and sometime also the judicial power.

BERTIL ODÉN

The Africa Association of Political Science, AAPS, is a pan-African organisation of scholars, whose mandate is to promote the study and application of political science in Africa. It was established in 1973. It has been supported by Sida/SAREC since 1995. The AAPS website is: www.aaps.org.za