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The Challenges of Leadership
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LEADERSHIP AND RECENT SOCIETAL TRANSFORMATIONS IN AFRICA

In the past two decades, Africa has witnessed systemic shifts in state-society relations as a result of what Samuel P. Huntington described as the third wave of democratization^[1]. The collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War transformed the international landscape. World powers began to reshape their approaches to international relations and to place a higher premium on support for democracy and good governance. The global winds of change from the outside coincided with the collapse of the state in many African countries, epitomized by the failures of one party states and military rule. Across the continent, the most significant events of that moment include the independence of Namibia in 1989, the holding of national conferences in Benin and other francophone African countries beginning in 1991, and the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1992. ^[2]

Success stories: In the early 1990s, there was significant optimism, and high hopes for democracy and good governance in Africa. Since that time, there has been a yearning for visionary and effective leadership on the continent. In October 1991, Heads of Government of the Commonwealth of Nations issued the Harare Declaration, which reaffirmed their commitment to fundamental principles in a previous declaration issued in Singapore in 1971. Notably, the Harare declaration outlined commitments to “face the challenges of the 1990s and beyond” and a pledge to work vigorously for “democracy, democratic processes and institutions ...the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary, just and honest government; fundamental human rights.”^[4]

Since the early 1990s, we have witnessed over 130 presidential elections in Africa, 69 percent of which have been considered credible enough to provide legitimacy to the victors. The Freedom House ratings of African countries also improved from just four free countries in the 1980s, to nine free and 23 partly free in 1992, and 11 free and 21 partly free in 2007.^[5] The Organization of African Unity (OAU), frequently criticized for ignoring gross human rights violations across

the continent, transformed itself into a more progressive, people-oriented African Union in 2000. And while only three heads of state voluntarily relinquished power between 1960 and 1990, the number of leaders that left power voluntarily has risen to over 40 since 1990: some of these leaders were term limited by the constitutions of their respective countries; others lost elections and accepted the outcome.

Developmental and democratization challenges: Despite the above-mentioned advances, Africa still faces several challenges: conflicts rage in Somalia, now a failed state, and in Darfur (western part of Sudan); armed skirmishes and gross human rights violations still occur in the Eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo; peace and reconciliation are fragile and the presence of peacekeepers still required in Cote d'Ivoire; and a striking 31 percent of recent elections in Africa have either been flawed or unrepresentative of the will of the people. Election-related disputes have sparked social upheaval, conflict and instability in several African countries as recently witnessed in Kenya, and as we are watching with increasing alarm in Zimbabwe. In fact, in today's Zimbabwe, one must deplore the polarization of political discourse, the intimidation and violence, and the possibility that yet another African country is about to descent into the abyss of civil conflict. The common thread uniting all of these challenges is political leadership, or the lack thereof. The scarcity of visionary and effective political leadership is indeed the greatest challenge that Africa faces today.

Against this backdrop, the fate of tomorrow's Africa will be determined by relational patterns in which the state and society grapple with the challenges of modernization and development at two variant speed levels. Many Africanists observe that Africans and their societies are always ahead of their states, and so I believe the true test of leadership would be in helping close the gap between the aspirations of the African people on the one hand, and the performance of their leaders on the other, in order to foster the consolidation of economic and political development. This implies that leadership does not have to emerge solely from the state or the executive branch of government.

Comparative overview: Leadership matters. And, in transitional societies struggling to rebuild or strengthen fragile political processes, visionary, bold and effective leadership matters even more.

In 1956, then US Senator John F. Kennedy wrote *Profiles in Courage*, a collection of reports on individuals that exercised political leadership through courageous actions and despite

overwhelming pressures to the contrary. In *Profiles in Courage*, Kennedy tells the story of Southern Senator Sam Houston of Texas who was the only Southern Democrat to vote against the Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854. The act would have allowed voters of US territories from Iowa to the Rocky Mountains to determine whether slavery would be allowed in their territory. Houston's constituency in Texas and the members of his party were furious at his refusal to vote for the act. As a result of his vote Houston was defeated in a race for the Texas governorship. He was also dismissed from the Senate by the Texas legislature in 1857. In 1859, Houston ran again for governor and was elected in what was perceived as a major setback for pro-slavery politics in Texas. Houston would ultimately be ousted from the governorship after Texas voted to secede from the Union and Houston refused to take an oath of allegiance to the Confederacy. Houston's courage in rejecting political expediency and maintaining his anti-slavery views was an example of true leadership. [6] Today, Sam Houston has a city named after him, many public buildings in Texas carry his name, and he remains a hero.

Slightly more than a decade ago, a gentleman on the continent regained his hard fought freedom after 27 years of imprisonment for daring to advocate for the freedom and basic rights of his fellow countrymen and women. President Nelson Mandela endured various enormities for close to three decades. Upon his release, Mandela could have poisoned race relations across South Africa and the world at large by revisiting the bitterness and victimization of the apartheid years; yet he opted for peace, national reconciliation and a democratic multiracial South Africa. That truly is extraordinary leadership, and yes, it is African too!

In these historic times, as Africa experiences multiple transformations in search of genuine leaders and greater democratic governance, we should reflect upon what late President Kennedy said about democracy. In 1956, Kennedy stated that "true democracy. . . puts its faith in the people – faith that the people will not simply elect men who will represent their views ably and faithfully, but also elect men who will exercise their conscientious judgment – faith that the people will not condemn those whose devotion to principle leads them to unpopular courses, but will reward courage, respect honor and ultimately recognize right." [7] Kennedy's words speak to the essence of political leadership and courage, just as the words of another 20th century leader Winston Churchill who stated, "Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it is the quality which guarantees all others." [8] The lives and leadership of Kennedy and Churchill, and Nelson Mandela, among many others, certainly inspire reflection on the qualities of transformative leadership.

PARADIGM SHIFT TOWARDS DEMOCRACY AND GOOD GOVERNANCE, AND ITS IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP

As African countries make the transition from one party or military rule to functioning democracies, two pertinent issues require particular attention with regards to leadership: a) constitutionalism and levers of effective governance; and b) the multiplicity of stakeholders and constituencies.

Constitutionalism and leadership

Governing effectively is a key leadership challenge in contemporary Africa. As is the case in modern nation-states, African constitutions, define the framework for the balance of power within the state, and state-societal relations. The constitutional doctrine of the separation of powers is a much-needed firewall in democracies, intended to curb the excesses of any one person or institution. Each branch of the government can serve as part of a web of checks and balances in order to hold leaders accountable to citizens. In democratic societies, the legislative, executive, and judiciary branches fulfill different roles, with distinct responsibilities. Leadership, properly exercised, recognizes the wisdom of such boundaries. Although African constitutions stipulate this separation of powers, in practice, the divisions between the respective branches of government is often challenged or disregarded. Unlike the very centralized nature of one party or military rule that created the impression that leadership emerged mainly from the executive branch, the reality of democratic governance is that political power is more diffuse and opportunities significantly higher for role models in leadership within other branches of government, and entities such as political parties, civil society organization and the media.

Role of parliament

Since the emergence of the third wave of democratization in Africa in the 1990s, legislatures across the continent have begun to conduct oversight of the executive branch of government and have developed additional capacity to craft legislation and represent citizen or constituent interests. In many cases, these developments have served to strengthen democratization processes despite the lack of adequate human and financial resources for many legislators. In a recent interview with the Africa All Party Parliamentary Group, a Ugandan MP spoke of the importance of engaging a country's entire population in the demand for accountability stating that "we need to reach a point where the building of a school in a local community is seen by that community not as a favor to be grateful for, but as the government's job."^[9] Although many legislatures are poorly staffed and function with far less resources compared to the executive branch, some progress has been made since the days of military and one-party rule when

legislatures were dissolved or merely rubberstamped dictates from the executive branch.^[10] Numerous examples now exist of impressive interventions by African legislatures demanding accountability from, and exercising oversight of the executive branch.

Attempts to amend constitutions to extend the office terms of incumbent rulers have been successfully halted by legislators in Zambia, Malawi and Nigeria. In May 2001 Zambian President Frederick Chiluba forced the Movement for Multiparty Democracy (MMD) party to re-nominate him as the party's presidential candidate. That move caused a split in the MMD. Protests resulted, and the parliament initiated impeachment proceedings. Shortly thereafter, Chiluba dropped his bid to seek a third term. In July 2002, the National Assembly of Malawi rejected proposals to amend the country's constitution to allow President Bakili Muluzi to run for a third term. Similarly, in May 2006, the Nigerian National Assembly rejected a constitutional amendment bill that would have allowed then President Olusegun Obasanjo to run for a third term in 2007. The Senate voted down the amendment, after which the House of Representatives withdrew the amendment from consideration. In all three cases, strong responses by legislators to the proposed third term agenda of incumbent presidents also galvanized labor unions, religious leaders, students and civil society organizations to oppose the move. Members of the respective legislatures felt empowered, as indeed they should be, in catering to the greater interests of citizens and the democratic future of the state.

In Ghana, the new constitution adopted in 1992 stipulates that the chairman of the Public Accounts Committee in parliament should be from an opposition party. The ultimate goal is to allow members of that very important committee to exercise oversight responsibilities effectively by closely scrutinizing the use of public finances.

In 1994, the National Assembly of Benin used its constitutionally mandated authority over the national budget to curb the influence of an overbearing Head of State over the budget enactment bill. In that instance, the executive branch had claimed that the budget adopted by the Benin National Assembly was inflated and thus endangered Benin's commitments to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). The executive branch sought to execute its own budget that was compliant with conditions negotiated with the World Bank and IMF under the country's structural adjustment plan. The Beninese National Assembly petitioned the constitutional court which ruled that the National Assembly had not violated the constitution as the budget passed by the National Assembly respected provisions that required a balanced budget, nor had the budget violated Benin's agreements with the World Bank and IMF as the executive had claimed. The

budget crisis was ultimately resolved as the National Assembly and the executive produced a harmonized version of the budget.[\[11\]](#) The 1994 budget crisis in Benin captured the National Assembly's effective assertion of a leadership role by defending its constitutional mandate. Even international financial institutions such as the World Bank and IMF drew lessons from that experience and in negotiating country poverty reduction strategies (PRSPs), now engage in greater and better outreach with political and civic leaders in emerging democracies.

Multiplicity of stakeholders and constituencies: Role of political parties

Political parties are the optimum mechanism through which citizen interests are aggregated. They also are the breeding ground for political leadership – and this pertains not just to ruling parties but to opposition parties as well. To help African countries consolidate the democratic gains of the last two decades, we must address the role of the opposition as a constructive, positive force in our body politic. Meaningful democracy requires an opposition to provide alternative policies, allow for dissenting views to be heard, and constructively criticize the government.[\[12\]](#) In many cases, the vibrancy of a democratic society is measured by the vitality of its opposition party or parties.

A parliament's leadership capabilities reflect the strength of the political parties represented in that body. A parliament in which parties are under the control of a single individual, ethnic group or geographic region will have a harder time representing the interests of the entire population. On the other hand, internal democracy within political parties will create more opportunities for transformative leaders to emerge. Representative and democratic political parties with accountable leadership will expand democratic practices within the legislature, and ultimately within the country as a whole.

Leadership at the source: Elections and legitimacy

In order for effective leaders to emerge, the electoral system and institutions such as independent election commissions and the judiciary must ensure free and fair elections that reflect the will of citizens. Flawed elections add to citizens' cynicism about the political process and therefore deprive countries of credible leadership that would otherwise have emerged and contributed more actively to national development. Flawed elections generate instability and conflict as illustrated by election-related violence in countries such as Kenya, Togo, Guinea and Cote d'Ivoire. Institutionalizing mechanisms that are fair, impartial and efficient is key to successful elections. For example, citizens and independent analysts in Ghana and Sierra Leone attribute the conduct of credible elections in these two countries to the impartiality, independence,

and responsiveness of their respective election commissions. These two Election Commissions are noted for their efforts at civic and voter education, and their embrace of civil society organizations as credible observers of the electoral process. In the particular case of Sierra Leone, a country still recovering from many years of armed conflict, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) made significant progress since the first post-conflict elections of 2002 during which the commission received significant support from the donor community. During the 2007 parliamentary and presidential elections, the NEC enhanced the transparency of the electoral process, provided voter education, and responded effectively and in a timely manner to issues raised by political parties, CSOs and other key interlocutors. Independent election administration bodies generally create an enabling environment for fair political competition and credible elections as citizens are able to choose freely their leaders through democratic processes. However, as is the case with fledgling institutions in emerging democracies, the effectiveness of institutions is oftentimes subsumed by the inefficiency or unprofessionalism of the individuals that manage same.

Civil society and the media as oversight organizations

In the last two decades, Africans at the grassroots level have advocated strongly for the right to determine how, and by whom, they are governed; and to hold those leaders accountable through regular and credible elections. During this timeframe, many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have played a vital role in promoting political participation and advocating for good governance on the continent^[14]. Nascent independent media, human rights associations, women's groups and bar associations, country chapters of Transparency International, have served as watchdogs in safeguarding newly won rights and freedoms in furtherance of democratic governance. In dire circumstances of state collapse, as was the case in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the late 1990s (and presently in other conflict zones across the continent), NGOs carried the burden of providing basic services in health and education.^[15] Since the democratic transitions of the 1990s, African media and CSOs have become viable enforcers of citizen oversight of governmental actions and activities. For example, during the March 2008 elections in Zimbabwe, CSOs worked to enhance opportunities for citizen participation in politics and governance. The Zimbabwe Elections Support Network (ZESN), a coalition of 38 Zimbabwean CSOs, played a historic role in conducting parallel vote tabulation (PVT) of the presidential poll. Through the collection of data from a random statistical selection of polling sites, ZESN was able to accurately project the outcome of the election. In a courageous show of leadership, ZESN released the results of the PVT despite the reluctance of the election commission and the government of Zimbabwe over a four week period to publish the official results. ZESN's findings

revealed clearly that opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai won a majority of the votes in the first round balloting thereby shattering the myth of invincibility of incumbent Robert Mugabe who has ruled the country for the last three decades. Undoubtedly, in the next decade or two when the history of today's Zimbabwe is written, historians will look extremely favorably at the extraordinary leadership and commitment to democratic governance, and courage of the ZESN civic activists in the face of massive intimidation and state-sponsored violence.

Cross cutting considerations regarding gender and leadership

Africa's population is at least 50 percent female and our democracy and collective future cannot be consolidated if that huge segment of society remains marginalized. Our democracies need more representation of women, not solely as party supporters, but also as leaders. We need to mainstream the desire for increased women's participation, so it is not perceived as an issue for women activists solely, but that male political leaders also take concrete steps to ensure that women become full participants in all aspects of political life. Some African governments articulate, rhetorically, a commitment to the promotion of women's participation or to gender mainstreaming; however concrete policies and programs must be put in place to sustain the rhetoric of commitment. The full implementation of gender mainstreaming and promotion of women's participation requires sustained political will and a firm expression of leadership.

In 2005, now President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia became the first African woman to be elected Head of State. Recently, African parliaments have experienced the fastest growth of female representation of any region of the world. Some African countries have enacted laws and taken steps in favor of a quota system on women's representation in order to ensure appropriate women's representation at all levels of elective office. While the debate persists on whether quotas are the best approach, a quota system in many countries has ensured that women's representation constitutes the commonly accepted 30 percent endorsed at the 1995 UN Beijing conference on women.^[17] Countries such as Mozambique, South Africa and Namibia used the quota system, and have achieved 39, 33 and 27 percent respectively of women's representation in legislative bodies. Rwanda used constitutional safeguards and election laws to implement a quota system that has contributed to a 48 percent level of women's representation in parliament, the world's largest proportion of women lawmakers in a legislative body. ^[18] Despite the challenges that these newly elected women legislators face, their presence in parliament in such high numbers helps "normalize the idea that women are politicians, government officials and leaders, which contributes to changing cultural and social perceptions of women."^[19] Women's organizations such as the 50/50 Group in Sierra Leone, the Abantu and WILDAF in Ghana

continue to work at both the grassroots and institutional levels to break new ground and create new opportunities for greater women's participation.

CONCLUSION

The renowned authors Barry Posner and James Konzes, in their seminal publication "The Leadership Challenge" (2007), define leadership as "*the art of mobilizing others to want to struggle for shared aspirations.*" These authors also identify six main skills of exemplary leadership:

- the ability to inspire a shared vision;
- the capacity to enable others to act;
- the ability to model the way or lead by example;
- the creativity to search out opportunities and challenge the status quo;
- the ability to recognize other people's contributions and to encourage the heart; and
- the ability to manage change and conflict.

These, I surmise, are the issues that we need to reflect upon deeply in the days ahead and through the pursuits of our political career goals. An objective examination of the challenge of leadership in contemporary Africa can identify many cases in which visionary leadership has made a difference. Best practices now exist on how effective leadership helps consolidate economic, social and political gains of the last two decades thereby closing the gap of legitimacy between the state and society still prevalent in some African countries.

At the same time, as Nelson Mandela said when he received the Nobel Peace prize in 1993: "*I dream of an Africa which is in peace with itself.*" Only through credible and effective leadership can we enable Africa to deal with the pending cases of conflict, health crisis, and bad governance. To succeed, such new approach must integrate into its comprehensive strategic plan, various pro-democracy constituencies, and leverage the experiences and responsibilities that each of these new democratic constituencies brings to the table. Without such a driven comprehensive approach, the challenges will endure, and the restiveness that we experience in some African countries will be exacerbated and spill over. And then the lofty goals of peace and development will continue to elude some of our societies and countries. Fortunately, the human capital represented at this workshop comprises a unique grouping of individuals whose collective efforts could provide the leadership needed to keep the peace, and ensure that prosperity and democratic governance stay on the rising pedestal.

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- [2] Christopher Fomunyoh, "Democratization in Fits and Starts," *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 3 (2001), 40.
- [3] Commonwealth of Nations, *Harare Declaration*. Harare, 1991.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Freedom House, "Freedom in the World Country Ratings," <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=15>
- [6] "Profiles in Courage" *John F. Kennedy Library Foundation* <<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Education+and+Public+Programs/Profile+in+Courage+Award/Profiles+in+Courage.htm>>
- [7] Ibid
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- [9] Africa All Party Parliamentary Group, "Strengthening Parliaments in Africa: improving support," March 2008 <http://www.royalafricansociety.org/documents/full_report.pdf> (11 June 2008)
- [10] Joel Barkan, "Legislatures on the Rise?," *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 2 (2008), 127.
- [11] Bruce A. Magnusson, "Democratization and Domestic Insecurity: Navigating the Transition in Benin," *Comparative Politics* 33, no. 2 (2001), 224-225.
- [12] Bogaards, Matthijs, "Crafting Competitive Party Systems: Electoral Laws and the Opposition in Africa," *Democratization* 7 no. 4 (2000), 171-2.
- [13] René, Lemarchand "Ghana's Electoral Commission Provides Regional Model," *African Voices* 7 no. 1 (1998), 2-3, 6.
- [14] The exact figures on African NGOs per country are hard to find, because not all NGOs are registered by their country governments. Many NGOs are effective in rural areas in various countries, even if their existence is not captured in national data. As of 1998, there were over 1000 NGOs in Uganda (Dicklitch, Susan. *The Elusive Promise of NGOs in Africa: Lessons from Uganda*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1998). In 2002, there were 150,000 NGOs in Kenya (Sinclair, Robert. "African NGOs: A Kaleidoscope of Efforts." *World Resources Institute*. <<http://www.wri.org/publication/content/8558>> 17 March 2008). South Africa had 93,300 NGOs in 1994 and 98,920 NGOs in 1999 (Swilling, M. and B. Russell. "The Size and Scope of the Non-profit Sector in South Africa." Graduate School of Public and Development Management, University of the Witwatersrand, Centre for Civil Society Studies and Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies, 2002).
- [15] A 2001 USAID report stated that in the DRC, the Catholic Church alone provided over 60 percent of the education and health care delivery services (USAID, "Democratic Republic of the Congo," www.usaid.gov/pubs/bj2001/afr/dc/).
- [16] The Initiative for Inclusive Security, "Demonstrating Legislative Leadership: The Introduction of Rwanda's Gender-Based Violence Bill" *Hunt Alternatives Fund* April 2008 <http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/1078_demonstrating_legislative_leadership.pdf> (12 June 2008)
- [17] Ibid
- [18] All representation statistics are from the International IDEA Global Database of Quotas for Women <<http://www.quotaproject.org/aboutQuotas.cfm>>
- [19] The Initiative for Inclusive Security, "Demonstrating Legislative Leadership: The Introduction of Rwanda's Gender-Based Violence Bill" *Hunt Alternatives Fund* April 2008 <http://www.huntalternatives.org/download/1078_demonstrating_legislative_leadership.pdf> (12 June 2008).