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Authoritarian Rule and Democracy in Africa: A Theoretical Discourse

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Preface

Economic reform and liberal democracy have emerged as the dominant ideas shaping the political and economic structures of countries in the last two decades of the twentieth century. Starting haltingly in the mid-1970s, democracy had triumphed by the end of the 1980s in practically all the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean. There has also been a swift movement toward democratic régimes in Asia though several countries, especially in South-East Asia, have continued to resist the democratizing trend. The closing years of the 1980s witnessed a dramatic fall of communist régimes in most countries of East and Central Europe and their replacement by fledgling democracies. It is in Africa and the Middle East that the democratic movement has made the slowest progress.

The last few years have, however, been marked by intense struggles for democratic reform in several African countries and the 1990s are likely to be the decade for transition to democracy in a growing number of African countries. In this highly topical study, Yusuf Bangura tackles the profoundly important and complex questions of the foundations and determinants of authoritarianism and democracy in Africa. The paper addresses itself to such questions as: How does one explain the persistence of authoritarian and military rules in a large number of African countries? What are the key processes involved in the transition from authoritarian and military régimes to civilian and democratic ones? What are the structural pre-conditions for sustenance of democratic systems in African countries? What are the implications of economic crisis and structural adjustment for the prospects of democracy in the continent?

A good deal of the mushrooming literature on this subject tends to focus on the political dimensions of democracy – the multi-party system, free elections and civil rights. And few analysts are able to resist the tendency to transplant in its entirety to Africa the democratic model as it has emerged in the West over decades. One of the strengths of Bangura's approach is that democratic struggles are placed within the wider social and economic context and the analysis is rooted in the institutional and historical reality of the region. The paper argues that it is the forms of accumulation interacting with a number of socio-economic variables which mainly determine the nature of the dominant political system.

The author identifies three dominant patterns of accumulation as transnational capitalist production, rent-seeking capitalism and petty commodity production. It is the strength or weakness of these patterns interacting with variables such as rural-urban integration, welfare services, social system and state-civil society relations which ultimately determine the shape of the political régime. In the last part of the paper, Bangura applies the above model to the Nigerian experience with focus on structural adjustment and democratization, demilitarization and civil governmental authority, civil society and the state and the democratization of the rules of competition.

This paper forms part of the ongoing work in the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development on the social and political dynamics of economic crisis and structural adjustment and more generally of its work on participation, democracy and development. Yusuf Bangura is a Research Fellow at the Institute with responsibility for the UNRISD project on Crisis, Adjustment and Social Change in Africa. Previously, he taught Political Economy at the Ahmadu Bello University in Nigeria and was a Research Associate at the AKUT programme at Uppsala University in Sweden.

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Director

1. Conceptualizing the Basis of Authoritarian Rule and Democracy

1.1 *The democratic question*

There is an awakening of interest in democratic theory and politics in Africa. Military and one-party régimes are faced with serious problems of legitimization, stemming from the crisis of the social contract that underpinned their post-colonial models of development. A variety of social groups are seeking protection against state repression and calling for alternatives to the structural adjustment programmes launched in the 1980s. Yet, until very recently, following the democratic uprisings in Eastern Europe, very few countries had followed the Latin American and Asian examples of establishing frameworks for transitions to democratic rule. What accounts for the dominance of authoritarian rule in Africa? Under what conditions is democracy likely to emerge and remain stable? I question received theories that ruled out democratic possibilities in Africa because of the logic of modernization or dependence, and those that currently try to establish a positive relationship between structural adjustment and democracy.

I begin by constructing a framework for theorizing the problems of authoritarianism and democracy. I situate the argument at the level of the organization of economic enterprises, with particular focus on forms of accumulation. I relate these to socio-political processes that influence the development of state-civil society relations and social contracts, giving rise to either authoritarian or democratic rule. I argue that although underdevelopment per se should not constitute a fundamental obstacle to democratization, the establishment of stable and sustainable democracy requires substantial changes in the forms of accumulation, the promotion of an acceptable level of welfare that will allow the majority of the people to have confidence in the capacity of democratic institutions to manage economic, social, and political conflicts; and the resolution of the contradictions between authoritarian relations that are dominant at the political sphere and nascent liberal pressures that are to be found in civil society.

In the second part, I examine the stages in the development of authoritarianism and democratization, emphasizing the changing strengths of the national coalitions for democracy. In the third and final part, I focus on the problems of democratization in crisis economies, with a Nigerian case study. I conclude by examining the case for linking struggles waged around questions of formal democracy with those that focus on aspirations for broader and more substantive forms of popular rule.

1.2 *Accumulation, authoritarianism and democracy*

Wealth creation is an integral part of class formation. It embodies relations of domination and subordination. Social and political life largely depends on how material production is organized and the methods used in reproducing/defending advantages and minimizing/overtaking disadvantages. The relevant question becomes whether dominant groups use authoritarian or democratic methods in regulating their business practices, and whether disadvantaged groups can freely pursue their interests and improve upon their life chances through open and non-repressive forms of transactions. The way production and business activities are organized have implications for the organization of civil society and state power.

Authoritarianism and democracy represent opposing modes of regulating conflicts thrown up by the dynamics of accumulation and development. These dynamics are strongly instrumentalist. Social groups and political authorities opt for democratic strategies if the latter can protect their advantages or minimize their losses in the economy and society

(Beckman, 1989). Struggles are waged over questions of representation and accountability, and the right to free expression and organization. Although democracy is primarily concerned with the rules and institutions that allow for open competition and participation in government, it also embodies social and economic characteristics that are crucial in determining its capacity to survive.

Three major processes appear to be central to democratic transitions from authoritarian military and one-party régimes: the demilitarization of social and political life; the liberalization of civil society; and the democratization of the rules governing political and economic competition. The first concerns the supremacy and regulation of civilian governmental authority; the second with the democratization of the state apparatus and the relative freedom of civil organizations; and the third with the capacity to democratically manage conflicts in civil and political society and economic practices. I argue, at this stage, the need to approach the question of democracy from its antithesis. Why has authoritarian rule persisted in Africa?

1.3 The structural roots of authoritarianism

I focus the discussion on the structural foundations of authoritarianism and situate the analysis within what I consider to be the three principal forms of accumulation in Africa. I identify these forms of accumulation as wage-exploitative monopolistic practices, incorporating both national and transnational enterprises; rent-seeking state capitalism; and the regulation of petty commodity production. The three encourage the growth of authoritarian values. Authoritarianism is inherent in the first two, whereas it expresses itself in petty production primarily in the way such petty production is linked with the reproduction of ruling classes that are organized around the state, local communities and markets.

Transnational firms embody the problems of economic concentration which Marxist and corporate theories of the firm have highlighted. Dahl has argued that “with very few exceptions, the internal governments of economic enterprises are flatly undemocratic both *de jure* and *de facto*” (Dahl, 1985: 55). The ownership and management structures of transnationals deepen inequalities and undermine effective participation in the governance of the enterprises.

The rise of the transnational firm led to profound changes in Western social structures and the relationship between markets and states. Habermas, for instance, contends that the quest for stable accumulation and political order required the state to supplant the market as the principal steering mechanism for the social and economic system and to effect “a partial class compromise” through welfare programmes and high wage levels that are set “quasi politically” (Habermas, 1973).

Habermas foresees a legitimization crisis arising from the state’s support for accumulation while simultaneously attempting to legitimate itself to the populace. Such a crisis threatens the democratic order of Western societies. There is little doubt, however, that the structural incorporation of the working class in the management of modern economies has helped to check the anti-democratic tendencies of transnational firms in Western societies.

The problems of transnational monopolies are, however, accentuated in developing countries by the firms’ supranational authority which compromises national sovereignty and allows managers to impose authoritarian régimes of industrial relations at the work place. The limited transformations of African economies by transnational capital produced a small labour force, unable to influence the state to regulate the anti-worker practices of multinational companies. Most decisions are taken by employers with little or no input from the work force. The principles of collective bargaining are poorly developed as many unions still grapple with the problems of recognition and organization and the right to participate in the determination

of working conditions. Industrial disputes are more often resolved by methods of co-optation and repression than by democratic persuasion and bargaining.¹

The second mode of accumulation highlights the way dominant groups in the economy and society appropriate rent through the state. Transnational and local firms may combine the formal modes of surplus appropriation with the siphoning of public resources. Neo-classical political economists associate economic distortions in developing economies with the emergence of powerful urban coalitions who use their privileged access to state resources to exploit rural communities (Bates, 1981; Lofchie, 1989). Rent-seeking activities, it is argued, cause developing economies to operate at sub-optimal levels (Bhagwati, 1982; Buchanan, 1980).

Tornquist has analyzed, at the wider political context, the different types of rent-seeking activities employed by various socio-political groups in India and Indonesia and their implications for authoritarian and democratic forms of rule (Tornquist, 1988). Toyo and Iyayi, examining the phenomenon in Nigeria, demonstrate that rent capitalism, which they call primitive accumulation, takes the form of contract inflation, the appropriation and valorization of land, and the use of bureaucratic positions for corrupt enrichment (Toyo, 1985; Iyayi, 1986). Patron-client relations, sometimes ethnic based, but often cross-national, are built into the alliances for the control and administration of state power. Ibrahim has shown how the methods described by Toyo and Iyayi were used by the leading groups in the ruling National Party of Nigeria to consolidate their grip on the political system of Nigeria's Second Republic (Ibrahim, 1988). The state became a central organ in private accumulation and class formation. It is in this sense that Ake talks about the over-politicization of African economies (Ake, 1987). The state is subjected to non-Weberian values of irrationality, inefficiency and disorder. Constitutionalism and the rule of law, central to democratic politics, fails to take root in the body politic.

The petty commodity sector presents a contradictory picture. Its authoritarian character is discussed mainly in the context of its incorporation into the modern economy. I use the concept of petty commodity production in a broad sense to cover activities in which producers are basically self-employed, rely on family or non-waged labour, and use rudimentary tools and skills to sustain their livelihood. These activities embody several complex social relations and straddle both urban and rural areas. They include peasant production and informal sector activities. Colonial historiography traces the constraints on African development to the traditional values embedded in the social practices of the actors in these enterprises.

A more sophisticated version of the thesis combines fragments of historical materialism with modernization theory to highlight the resilience of the "peasant mode of production", and the need for a proper capitalist revolution to overcome the problems of underdevelopment, corruption and authoritarianism (Hyden, 1983). "Tribalism", an impediment to democracy and accumulation, is understood to be a direct attribute of the "relations of affection", rooted in "pre-capitalist" values and practices. The contemporary African state is projected as a pathetically poor modernizer as it has failed to "capture" the small-scale producers buried in these "relations of affection".

Other scholars and peasant-oriented activists contend that some of the essential values of small-scale farming societies are conducive to the growth of a democratic culture and practice (Berg-Schlosser, 1985). Nyerere based his strategy of Ujamma, for instance, on the "democratic" and growth potentials of peasant social relations (Nyerere, 1967). Informal

¹ I make no distinction between local and foreign capital in terms of the organizational practices of their enterprises and their policies toward labour. In fact, several studies have shown that indigenous firms tend to be more contemptuous of the rights of workers to form labour unions. See, for instance, Olukoshi, 1986.

democratic processes are, undoubtedly, present in many peasant societies, expressed specifically in the way collective decisions are taken in the governance of common resources and the resolution of conflicts. Others with a neo-liberal outlook argue that the proliferation of non-governmental organizations and independent small-scale producers, following the crisis and market reforms, will eventually provide the foundations for the establishment of democracy (Bratton, 1989a,b).

Both perspectives ignore the way petty commodity activities have been structured historically, being subjected to various layers of authority as capitalism and the state penetrate the countryside. The limitations of Hyden's central concepts and thesis have already been exposed by a host of authors (Williams, 1987; Kasfir, 1986; Mamdani, 1985; Cliffe, 1987; Beckman, 1988; Himmelstrand, 1989). The optimism of the neo-liberals in seeing the informal sector as the vanguard for democracy and for surviving the African crisis is also being seriously challenged (Meager, 1990; Mustapha, 1990).

Mamdani has shown, with particular reference to Uganda, the rigidities in agrarian social relations brought about by the undemocratic character of the rural power structures (Mamdani, 1986 and 1987). Similar studies for other countries show the authoritarian content of the structures that pull the peasantry into the national economies and the world market. The interests of the groups that dominate transnational monopolies and state projects hold sway in the petty commodity sector. Such interests block the development of the democratic potential of independent small-scale production. The values of communal life are manipulated by the dominant groups to sustain support for their struggles over political offices and economic resources. Hyden's "tribalists", far from being the product of "pre-capitalist relations of affection", are rather the creation of modern conditions and activities (Mamdani, 1985; Eke, 1975). Patron-client relations regulate peasant production and incomes and facilitate the administration of state power. Clientelism prevents self-development and social independence, critical for the construction of democracy.

1.4 The basis for democratic struggles

The authoritarian thrust of the three forms of accumulation is, however, not incontestable. Disadvantaged social groups challenge authoritarian rule and advance alternative, sometimes democratic, forms of politics. I try to capture the structural basis of such struggles in the contradictions that are inherent in three forms of accumulation. Pressures for democratization are not exclusively confined to the politics of subordinate groups. Business groups may also play active roles in democratization, depending on the changing nature of the forms of accumulation and the capacity of the political system to manage conflicts between the dominant groups.

Tornquist has argued that in discussions on classes and democracy, it is more important to highlight "how capitalists try to gain and protect their economic strength" than to emphasize

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