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Rwanda's political evolution has attracted international interest from a wide array of opinion makers ranging from journalists, aid providers, thought leaders, political and economic analysts to casual 'political tourists' with no prior knowledge of Africa. A number of supposedly more knowledgeable analysts including high profile diplomats routinely reach the same conclusions as the more casual observers: they praise the socio-economic progress of the country and in the same breath denounce what they see as a lack of political and civil rights.

The common narrative told by this group is that Rwanda is doomed to fail in its reconstruction endeavor if it does not adopt unrestricted - some would say unrestrained - competitive politics.

Then another narrative, notably held by the Rwandan government, differs strikingly from the first one. It maintains that in order to ensure stability, socio-economic and political progress, political participation is constitutionally regulated because of the country's awful past experience and it furthermore advocates a balanced strategy for a successful state building allying political, civic rights and economic progress.

The debate between these two opposing narratives has, until now, focused more on apparently diverging facts while not enough attention has been paid to the ideologies underpinning their interpretations.

Ideology intervenes when real life realities of Rwanda's or even Africa's political context are ignored and replaced by an unmitigated normative approach giving the same default answers to very different political situations. To bring a bit more clarity to the debate, let's look at experiences of democratization in Africa that will set the wider context of Rwanda's political evolution.

A sobering balance sheet

Let us start with the latest scientific analysis of democratization in Africa and the developing world. First, there is a strong consensus among specialists about how democratization in Africa is faring. They almost unanimously acknowledge that the establishment of democracy has made tremendous progress since the early 1990s all over the world. With the notable exception (until recently) of the Arab world, democratic transitions have indeed occurred in "unlikely places" including in the poorest countries in the world and this with no economic, political or cultural prerequisites. Today, only a handful of countries in Africa don't hold regular elections.

Nevertheless, the strong democratic optimism that grew from the initial wave of democratization in the 1990s has given way to a more sober appraisal of the current status of democratic consolidations in the developing world and in Africa in particular.

The inability of these new democracies to meet the demands and basic needs of their citizens, including the provision of basic public goods and development, has led to the questioning of their nature, quality, efficiency and sustainability.

Many middle income or poorer but economically growing new democracies in Latin America or Africa are afflicted with growth without prosperity leading to weak popular support for democracy. Afrobarometer, the most authoritative source for the measurement of public attitude to democracy in Africa, in surveys conducted in 2008 in 19 best performing African democracies most of them in the higher income bracket of the continent demand for democracy stands on average at 47 percent. For the least developed countries, the situation is even worse.

For this category of countries, maybe the most striking contribution came from Paul Collier in the very insightful book 'Wars, Guns and Votes' presenting the results of a comprehensive and inquisitive statistical analysis of the relation between political violence and democracy.

Development matters

He found that in countries that were at least at middle-income levels, democracies systematically reduced the risk of political violence while in low-income countries, democracy made society more dangerous.

Collier provocatively asserts that democracy in least developed countries is home to the bottom billion poor and not only increases the risks of violence but does not provide legitimacy or accountability either.

Democracy, insisted upon by the donor community in these countries in the absence of its vital infrastructure (functioning institutions), are for him the electoral façade of democracy that is more likely to frustrate democratic accountability rather than fast-track it for very simple reasons.

First, in the absence of effective media scrutiny in the bottom billion countries, voters have little understanding of the choices they face even where the past performance of the incumbent has been good; it is open to multiple interpretations.

Second, in addition to the problem of poor information, voters tend to vote for or against the incumbent based on their ethnic identity rather than their performance. Because these societies are often divided into competing ethnic identities, ethnicity is by far the easiest basis by which the incumbent can build political loyalty.

Thus voters become frozen in blocks of rival identities, and actual performance or competence of the contenders becomes irrelevant in winning elections. Instead, incumbents turn to cronyism both within their own identity group and marginally in other groups as well, to broaden their chances.

Third, rather than appealing directly to voters through good government, incumbents will corrupt political intermediaries who will successfully deliver the votes of their respective constituencies. As a result, the democratization process becomes a political game captured by a small political elite which includes allies within the governing party, the opposition waiting eagerly to get its turn, and the civil society playing its part of the game.

This system has notably become completely compatible with strong economic growth coming from an insulated private sector economic space, more so in countries with large extractive industries or disconnected national and international enterprises.

Meanwhile, remarkably most of these growing African economies will fail to achieve most of the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Furthermore, election cycles in many of these countries bring in regular stalling of policy reforms and end up in insurrectional situations while disgruntled disfranchised groups organize themselves into politicized banditry, religious and ethnic extremism.

Population growth, urbanization and increased levels of education and unemployment may explain the recent upsurge of instability in these electoral democracies and represent the most important threat to the current African economic progress.

For Collier, the creation of a sense of national unity through the building of the nation and of institutions of accountability should be given priority over competitive elections, in order for the democratization process in weak and poor states to succeed. But for this to work the emergence of an enlightened visionary leadership is needed.

The substance of Collier's analysis regarding democratization in weak and poor states is commonly shared among a number of academics and think tanks concerned with empirical evidence advising public aid agencies, and the evidence is growing by the day.

Nevertheless, the international community systematically pushes for democratization strategies that, more often than ever, are producing instability and continued widespread poverty in countries lacking of vital institutions.

The latest electoral exercises in sub-Saharan Africa, both in two emblematic post-conflict countries, are a reminder of this vivid reality. They are only the latest illustration of a trend of the electoral processes that Africa has witnessed since last year. With very few exceptions, it seems that 15 years after the initial democratization wave, the electoral processes in weak states leads more and more to instability. One of the fundamental problems of the Western ideological insistence for rigid 'democratic access' processes is the total disregard of what comes after.

Many voices measuring, monitoring and blindly advocating for democracy inputs have been established - Freedom House, World Bank Governance Matters, Mo Ibrahim Index, Polity IV data, the usual human rights organizations and the international media, crowding out the debate and rendering it completely one sided and insensitive to the real lives of Africans. What about the Arab Spring?

Here the message from its revolutions is mixed but corroborates the relationship between income and democracy presented above; the youth from the middle class elites bravely fought for access rights to democracy while the poor masses seemed to be more concerned with the output, voting for the Islamists perceived by them as more susceptible to fight corruption, injustices and improve their livelihoods but as threats to democracy by others.

Legitimacy in Rwanda

In comparison to other African countries, Rwanda was by all accounts a worst-case scenario for democratization even if we exclude the episode of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi and the four years of war that preceded it.

The poorest among the poor, Rwanda was ranked in 1990, 2nd worst in access to health in the world by the Human Development Report, 5th from the bottom in calories intake, and 2nd last in percentage of rural population living in poverty. Only recently did the Human Development Report series publish data for previous years.

As a student of Rwanda's political and economic history, I was not surprised to find out that from 1964 to 1966, when the first massacres took place, Rwanda's population was suffering the most from hunger in the world. These first massacres, like in 1994, were carried out mostly by the population. Politically, the entrenchment of the discriminatory system prior to 1994 with strict ethnic and regional quotas was only second to the apartheid but more intensely murderous.

The worst political violence the country passed through came about as the outcome of two and only competitive politics interludes (1957-1963 and 1990-1994). With this kind of political culture and socio-economic context, unrestrained political participation in the reconstruction process would not have brought us where we are, to put it mildly.

Today, the constitutional and legal boundaries to participation in the Rwandan political process are related to the issues of divisionism and the ideology of Genocide and were thoroughly tested in the run into the 2010 presidential elections. Based on these laws, two potential presidential candidates have been prevented from registering their candidacy.

A number of observers, mostly from outside the country, condemn to this date the action which they see as an unacceptable infringement to the right of political participation and restriction of voters choice. However, what is often

overlooked is that, as the presidential electoral campaign started, Rwandans were fully aware of what the people that have not been able to contest the elections were standing for.

For months prior to their arrest, these two people were extensively interviewed several times a week on at least two daily independent radio news programmes, BBC and VOA in Kinyarwanda, not only on their ideas but also on current affairs.

It is during this period that they gave inflammatory speeches and exhibited other unlawful behaviour leading to their arrest. This contributed to an international outcry. In spite of or maybe because of that, the participation to the presidential elections reached 97 percent of the registered voters and 93 percent of those who voted for President Paul Kagame.

These high percentages certainly reflect the still dramatic nature of presidential elections in Rwanda not in a dissimilar manner to the runoff of the 2002 presidential elections in France when Jacques Chirac received 82 percent of the vote against far right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen.

The voice of Rwandan voters was made even clearer considering the enormous international media pressure on the government before the electoral campaign and the overwhelming if not defiant popular attendance in Paul Kagame's electoral campaign meetings.

Constitutional restrictions to political participation of ethno-populists for the sake of stability and national unity have received a strong legitimacy stamp in the midst of intense international controversy. I can only speculate here but chances are that Rwandans behaved in this manner because knowing their history, they were convinced that that was the right thing to do, if they are to preserve the progress they are making.

As Rwandans, to be consistent, we should refrain from giving "lessons" but I strongly believe that our fellow Africans should take note of our story.

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