

Africa's Multicultural Tradition and Current Arab Trends

HHH Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie

Chairman, Crown Council of Ethiopia

Africa's multicultural tradition and its influence on the Arab Spring are challenging and singularly complex subjects, certain to frustrate those who seek neat, linear, cause-and-effect relationships. In many respects, Africa's multicultural tradition, when juxtaposed against the complex and largely externally imposed circumstances of Africa's turbulent history, and the realpolitik of today, is but a small—albeit critical—component in the dynamic, driving the people and institutions of modern Africa, and its regional neighbors, towards change. Washington's US policy establishment, for instance, contains more fractious 'tribes' than Iraq and Afghanistan combined, each with its own political agenda and pandering media-congressional constituency. How, one wonders, can objective truth divining the complexly-nuanced affairs of ancient nations half a world away possibly emerge from such a riot of contending institutional interests and agendas?

A contemporary map of Africa shows the borders imposed on the continent by the European colonizers during German Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck's Berlin Conference (1884). A map of Africa's tribal or cultural groups, however, reveals much more complexity. European colonists in 1884 were wholly indifferent to existing groups and cultures as they delineated State borders, and most of these borders still exist today.

Pre-colonial Africa was dominated by tribal religions. Islam subsequently spread into Africa from the northwest, while European colonizers brought Christianity to much of sub-Saharan Africa. Whereas a process of acculturation occurred in the Islamic areas (Islam completely replaced earlier religions), transculturation occurred in many of the European controlled areas as Christian beliefs blended and combined with existing tribal religions creating different, unique, Christian, or African-Christian, religions.

The colonial boundaries imposed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries have become the State boundaries of today. These artificially created structures, surrounding and concentrating large numbers of dissimilar cultural groups (tribes), have tended to breed and exacerbate inter-group tensions and rivalries spawning many seemingly intractable inter-country conflicts—Sierra Leone, Sudan, Angola, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Rwanda are modern examples of this dynamic.

In considering contemporary multiculturalism and the nascent democratic institutions which are presently being forged in the crucible of revolution, it is critical to remember that one size does not fit all—never has, never will. Inevitably, attempts to introduce democratic institutions have (and will) produce varied, unexpected and unintended outcomes. Further, there is always the possibility of Democratic Paradox—when democratic institutions and traditions freely choose or evolve into something other than democracy. While there is great hope that nascent democratic institutions will promote and empower minority rights, gender equality, cultural pluralism, and equality under the

law, this is not always the case. Even in the so-called mature democracies, challenges persist: how to protect the rights of minorities and other marginalized groups, from both democratically imposed “tyrannies of the majority,” and the frequently self-righteous and intolerant authoritarian tendencies of absolutist theologies.

Extra-Territorial Actors: Africa “In Play”

Post-colonial Africans have frequently been powerless and unwitting pawns in the power games and agendas of extra-territorial players. Indeed, the pernicious legacy of colonial and Cold War “manipulations” can be seen today in the proxy wars and cross-border conflicts of Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea, Somaliland, Sudan and Egypt, among others.

Africa is once again “in play” with powerful extra-territorial nation states hubristically viewing the African continent and resources as “their” arena for geopolitical sparring and manipulation. By the end of this decade, it is likely that sub-Saharan Africa will become as important a source of US energy imports as the Middle East. China, India, Europe, and others are aware of this, and have their own designs on Africa’s abundant oil, natural gas, and other resources. These same players are also becoming increasingly aggressive in seeking out investments, winning commercial contracts and markets, and building the requisite military and political support on the continent.

Due to China’s pragmatic and highly effective non-interventionist approach on African issues of governance, human rights, and economic policy, China’s activities on the African continent are increasingly viewed by Washington as particularly important challenges to US interests. In Sudan, for example, China has pragmatically combined its large investment in that country’s oil industry with protection of the Government of Sudan from UN sanctions in Darfur.

The Arab Spring

While the end result of the dramatic political transitions presently underway in the Middle East and Africa remains unclear, events never occur in a vacuum—history did not begin yesterday. All these occurrences, in varying degrees, are the result (intended or otherwise) of the convergent and cumulative manipulations of various domestic and extra-regional players, in nuanced and brutal pursuit of their individually-perceived regional interests.

Recent developments in Tunisia, for instance, could be the catalyst for robustly proliferating democracies across the Maghreb, Africa, and indeed, the entire Arab world, or Tunisia could deteriorate into a situation like that of Algeria in the early 1990s (or even more recently in Palestine and Lebanon), where democratization was abruptly halted, and the country plunged into a murderous civil war when it became obvious that a democratically elected Islamist government might legitimately come to power.

France

With the arguable exception of Portugal, France stands unique in modern political history in the powerful and seemingly inseparable synergy between itself and its former African empire. When it realized that decolonization had become inevitable, Paris implemented a plan of political genius: undertaking all that was necessary to leave Africa and doing so in such a way as to effectively retain authority over and access to their former colonies.

Such a philosophy rests upon a fundamentally racist and politically-convenient fiction that Africans, “joyous by nature,” as Jacques Chirac once stated, “are simply big children.” It is this alleged immaturity that empowers France (and others) to act in a way so undemocratic in Africa that its practices would be unimaginable back home in a democratic France. General Charles de Gaulle’s trusted advisor, Jacques Foccart, was the architect of France’s neocolonial stratagem. His methods were simple: install trusted African politicians, some with French nationality, as the heads of these 14 new African states and maintain a firm, French grasp on their natural resources. It was/is a system ripe for mischief that inevitably institutionalized corruption and instability, and it could never exist without massive, abuses of human rights.

The 21st Century

Despite the African Union’s highly public and robust objections, NATO forces’ ‘interventions’ to arguably ‘humanitarian’ considerations in Libya are being conducted by essentially the same group of colonial invaders that brutally colonized, dominated and exploited the African people. Indeed, the Libyan example of unilateral Great Powers’ intervention could be a portent of the evolving narrative for 21st century Africa—a series of neo-colonial, ‘western-compliant’ African gangster governments, sponsored by cynically self-serving Western or Asian powers and/or individuals.

To exploit the booming revolution business, we are witnessing the application of a cynical and time-proven stratagem—buy your own gang. One hardly even needs to visit or administer the territory of one’s satrap; simply provide support, international political cover, munitions, bribes and protection to keep the roads and airports open; and in turn, your local clients compensate you with access to resources, bases, etc. You camouflage the real purpose and intentions of your ‘arrangement’ by characterizing your bargain as “helping Africans to help themselves” or “security assistance,” etc.

A recent RAND report obliquely acknowledges such arrangements by pointing out that Washington’s assistance programs “can have a negative effect on democratic development by strengthening a state’s capacity for repression,”¹ and as one study concluded “the more foreign police aid given [to repressive states], the more brutal and less democratic the police institutions and their governments become.”

¹ RAND National Security Research Division, *Securing Tyrants or Fostering Reform? U.S. Internal Security Assistance to Repressive and Transitioning Regimes*, 2006, 20.

Djibouti in Africa's far northeast, for example, may well demonstrate Africa's evolving 21st century neo-colonial prototype. This diminutive, albeit strategically located, country exists in a category of its own by remaining significantly subordinate to both the military elements of its own colonial master, France, and since 2003, Washington's Djibouti-based Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA).

Conclusion

Africa's universal yearning and quest for freedom must transcend the continent's pre-modern loyalties to sects, tribes and ethnicities. The evolving challenge is to build inclusive and empowering democratic institutions where people's voices count. Indigenous leaders and Foreign Powers can no longer be allowed free-reign; the old-reliable colonial game of divide-and-conquer can no longer be tolerated—it is no longer acceptable.

The determination and willingness to subordinate one's personal well-being and concerns to the general welfare of the people has always been the hallmark of enlightened leadership. Ultimately, Africa's future will rise or fall on the moral quality and character of its leaders.

The Emperor Haile-Selassie of Ethiopia—The Last Christian Emperor—was the living embodiment of these relentlessly demanding leadership precepts of morality, character and duty. In choosing to relinquish power during a Cold War inspired Marxist uprising, rather than to deploy his substantial military force against his own people, the Emperor's tragic demise in 1975 stands as an enduring inspiration and example to all Africans, and indeed, to all who aspire to future leadership.*

* *Editor's Note: This piece is adapted from a speech by HH Prince Ermias Sahle-Selassie Haile-Selassie. The speech was presented to the Institute of World Politics on April 28, 2011.*