

Americanizing Africa and Democratizing the World?

From Vision to Experience

By Dr. Ali A. Mazrui

With every new generation it becomes less and less realistic to view Africa's problems in geographical isolation. To paraphrase an English poet, John Donne:

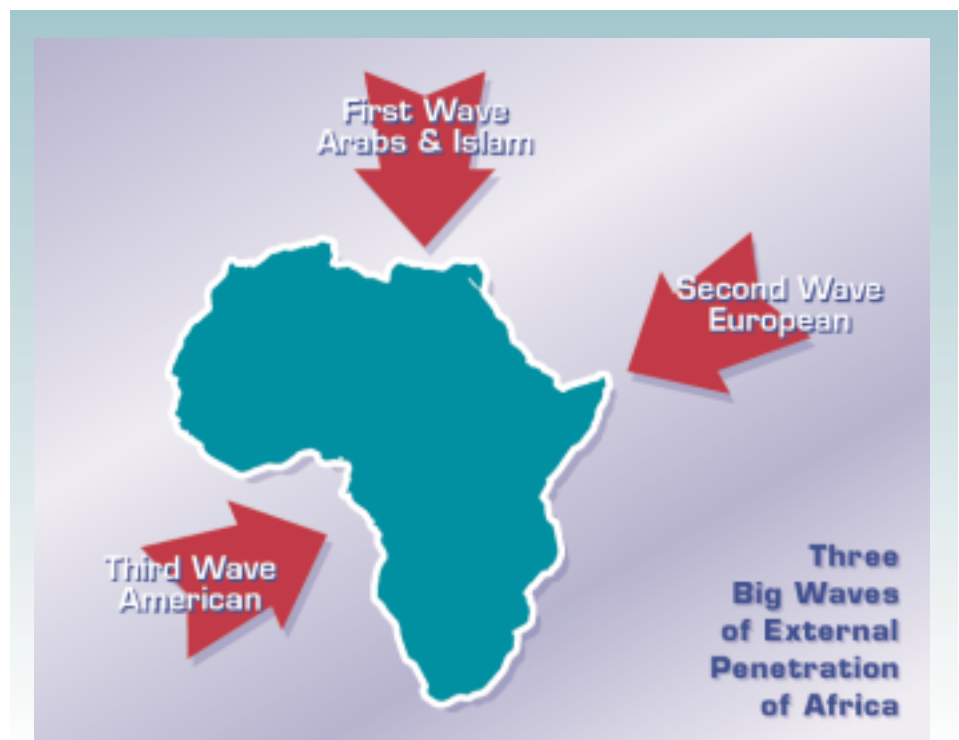
*No continent is an island entire
unto itself.*

*And therefore never send to know for
whom the bell tolls; it tolls for us all.*

At the cosmic level of history, there have been three big waves of external penetration of Africa. There was first the impact of the Arabs and Islam upon Africa, from the seventh century of the Christian era onwards.

Almost a whole millennium later there was the impact of Europe on Africa - through the slave-trade, colonization and empire-building. The European penetration of Africa became particularly extensive from the nineteenth century onwards when the scramble for Africa gathered momentum.

What has started now is the third major wave of alien penetration of Africa - the forces of American influence and power. The American wave into Africa started after World War II with the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. The Cold War has now been followed by the American War on terrorism, at a time



when the United States has become the most powerful global force in history since the collapse of the Roman Empire.

The first alien wave into Africa of the Arabs and Islam stimulated both positive changes and negative consequences in Africa's experience. The second alien wave of Europe into Africa started with the evil of the slave trade but later matured into the more complex impact of European

colonialism, encompassing both pluses and minuses for Africa.

This third wave of the potential Americanization of Africa is still in its infancy. It could just mean a new style of imperialism for Africa. Or it could herald positive changes in Africa's future.

Outside Africa the administration of George W. Bush would like to democratize not only Iraq but the whole of the Middle East. That is

indeed a tall order, especially since this administration has done more damage to American democracy at home than any other administration since the days of Senator Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. But since the United States has now become the undisputed superpower, it is still worth considering whether its immense resources and influence should not be channeled to such great long-term causes as the democratization of the whole world. America can be a power for good or a power for evil. American militarism is a danger to the human race, but can American democratic idealism be tapped to benefit the human race? If the Roman Empire two millennia ago left a legacy of the Rule of Law, can the new American Empire of today leave behind a legacy of global democracy?

Such dreams appear hollow in the present atmosphere of detention without trial in America, a Patriot Act which legitimizes extensive surveillance of citizens, a "Big Brother" who is prepared to interrogate libraries secretly about which books citizens read, a readiness to engage in preemptive and preventive war on others with little respect for international law.

But in the larger view of whether America can be a benevolent or malevolent empire, it is worth encouraging the forces of benevolence in American political culture towards influencing the world for the better. George W. Bush has even declared the desirability of creating a free trade area between the United States and the Middle East.

But the American ambition to democratize the world, though worthy of consideration, is fraught with risks. In this essay let us explore both the promise and the peril by using as an example the interaction between the United States and Africa from a

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democratic perspective.

The United States' impact on the fortunes of democracy in Africa is only partially an outcome of the foreign policy of U.S. governments. A more sustained process is through non-governmental organizations - ranging from American philanthropic and religious groups to the Carter

Center in Atlanta, and ranging from concerned scholars in the United States to the Trans Africa Forum in Washington, D.C., and ranging from the novelist Alice Walker to first generation American citizens who are immigrant Africans. This is quite apart from the ambiguous role of U.S. transnational corporations.

The Culture of Democratization

Here again it is worth distinguishing between normative democracy and institutional democracy. Normative democratic concerns focus on issues like human rights and freedom of speech and the right to a fair trial. Institutional democratic concerns include promoting the right to vote, the holding of free elections, the championing of political pluralism, and the presumed link between political liberalism and economic liberalism. Non-governmental American promotion of democracy in Africa is highly normative. It is often targeted at issues like detention without trial, freedom of the Press and such barbarities as the crude execution of Ken Sarowiwa of Ogoniland in Nigeria in 1995.

Since September 11 there is the complicating factor of the U.S. war on terrorism. Does it help or hurt democratization in Africa? Some African governments may use the war to repress their political opponents.

Increasingly, female circumcision has been denounced as "female genital mutilation" and a violation of human rights. The term is clearly much more partisan than the term

“slavery” – for the term “slavery” was used by both defenders and critics of the institution. But the word “mutilation” is used only by those who criticize the ritual. In the campaign against the genital ritual the United States’ government has joined forces since 1996. From then on, running away from the danger of female circumcision has become grounds for political asylum in the United States, following the precedent set by a Togolese asylum seeker in 1996.

Canada has also made running away from female genital surgery grounds for political asylum into the country. Some have seen such a development as the emergence of cultural asylum - to deal with cultural threats to human rights in other societies.

The problem of where to draw the line between cultural imperialism and promoting cultural democracy is still persistent. African cultural nationalists protest that Western society whose pressures on Western women to be slim create female eating disorders, and whose pressures on women to have artificially inflated breasts through implants, create so many blood and skin disorders in women, are not the best qualified to throw the first stone at African conceptions of female legitimacy - even if both forms of sexism are reprehensible.

The Political Economy of Democratization

The main ideological exports of the United States government are first, market economic ideologies and second, liberal democracy. George W.

Bush’s vision of a free trade area between the United States and the Middle East may be part of the strategy of marketeering.

From the United States’ point of view, the export of market-ideologies to the rest of the world is self-regarding. It is directly intended to serve the interests of the United States. The export of

or choosing puppet rulers?

Because the export of market ideologies is self-regarding to Americans, it has been pursued with greater vigour and greater consistency than the promotion of liberal democracy. Market ideologies have also been pursued and promoted energetically by the World Bank and the International Monetary

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liberal democracy is other-regarding. It is intended to serve the interests of the beneficiary-state, at least in the first instance.

The export of market ideologies, although clearly self-regarding, has been quite often the more candid and sincere. But the promotion of liberal democracy by the U.S. government has often been selective, manipulative, moralistic and often hypocritical. In the new post-war Iraq, is the United States promoting democracy

Fund - while at the same time both Bretton Woods institutions have insisted that their statutes did not allow them to promote democratic values. When I served on the World Bank’s Council of African Advisors in the 1980s and 1990s I repeatedly asked the Bank to devise a calculus of democratic indicators by which an African country would be judged democratically before a loan was granted - the Mobutus and Moises of the 1980s. Vice-President Kim Jaycox of the World

Bank repeatedly protested that it could not be done under the statutes of the World Bank.

Partly because market ideologies have been pushed with greater vigour and consistency than has liberal democracy, the market is almost triumphant by the beginning of the twenty-first century. There are more countries which have been forced to privatize and adopt market-oriented programmes than there are countries that have been penalized for not democratizing. The United States has played a big role in universalizing market ideologies in the twentieth century - but America's record in promoting democracy is mixed at best, and window-dressing at worst.

Between the Ballot and the Market

But even if the United States is a vigorous marketeer in Africa and poor democratizer, is that necessarily a bad thing? Is it not conceivable that the greatest preparation for a liberal democratic order in Africa is learning the skills of capitalism? Is the direct empire of capitalism inadvertently laying the foundations for the democratization of the world?

It is certainly true that all liberal democratic countries in the world today are also capitalist countries - though not all capitalist countries are liberal democracies. All liberal donkeys are capitalist animals but not all capitalist animals are liberal donkeys. Is the fact that all liberal democracies are capitalist countries an accident of history or a logical necessity?

I am prepared to believe that it is a logical necessity. For example, I am prepared to believe that it is not possi-

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ble to have a pluralistic press independent of the government without advertising from the private sector. So a free press needs the existence of independent powerful advertising interests in the economy. A free press needs some degree of capitalism - but the capitalism can be as contained as that of Sweden and not as reckless as that of the United States.

If then the United States, the World Bank and IMF are laying the foundations of capitalism in Africa, are they also laying the foundations of future global democracy?

In reality capitalism may be a necessary condition for liberal democracy, but it is not a sufficient condition. A number of other things need to develop before economic liberalism (i.e., capitalism) evolves into political pluralism (i.e. liberal democracy).

It is therefore vital that the kind of market ideologies which the United States, the World Bank and IMF have been imposing upon Africa do not stifle the emergence or growth of those other necessary conditions for liberal democracy in Africa. For example, if external infusion of capitalism would favour foreign capitalists and stifle local entrepreneurship, it would not serve its democratizing purpose.

Africa and the Federal Paradigm

There is an American innovation which is missing in Africa, has not been externally promoted by the United States, and which may be far more relevant for liberal democracy in Africa in the twenty-first century than many have realized. The missing American agenda is FEDERALISM. For the first half-century of postcolonial experience in Africa, the word federalism has been anathema almost everywhere in Africa apart from Nigeria.

And in Nigeria federalism has been substantially negated by three or four decades of military rule since inde-

pendence. State rights and human rights have been trivialized by military arbitrariness. The civilian rule of Olusegun Obasanjo has been only marginally better.

Clearly federalism is at best only a necessary condition for a pluralistic liberal order and not a sufficient condition. What has been remarkable since independence has been the following: Africa's reluctance to seriously consider federalism as a solution to its tumultuous ethnic upheavals and, secondly, the United States' reluctance to sell federalism as part of the American liberal legacy.

Indeed, Africa worked itself up into a condition of acute psychological denial. Loyalty to tribe was regarded as political pathology - in spite of the fact that such loyalties will remain part of Africa for at least another century. The UNESCO General History of Africa even banned the use of the word "tribe" in all its massive eight volumes (including Volume VIII edited by this author).

Ignoring the salience of ethnic loyalties has cost Africa three to four million lives in civil conflict since independence.

On the other hand, some of the countries which have attempted to make concessions to those loyalties have reduced the risks through the utilization of "ethnic arithmetic" as a principle of representation. Botswana has been cited as one such country. Sometimes ethnic arithmetic in an African government constitutes a kind of informal ethnic Senate House. Post-Manguistu Hailu Mariam's Ethiopia

has taken the issue even further — decentralizing power from the center to ethno-cultural groups and attempting to create a federation of cultures.

In the twenty-first century should the United States consciously seek to export its expertise on federalism and the federal experience to countries trying to find ways of reconciling the imperative of unity with the reality of diversity in a democratic order? One country which could have benefited from a federal structure if it had been promoted early enough, and with enough inducements, was SUDAN.

What may be required is not merely a federation between a northern region and southern region but a multi-state federation, re-defining both northern units and southern units. That may still be the answer, although there are some who would describe such a solution as "too little, too late."

Genocide and the Shield of Federalism

Such a new federal vision which is crying out for experimentation would also help solve the problem of the Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda and Burundi. We start from the premise that Rwanda and Burundi are dual societies and not plural societies. Dual societies have a high propensity towards polarization - as in the case of Greek Cypriots versus Turkish Cypriots, Catholics versus Protestants in Northern Ireland, Tamils versus Sinhalese in Sri Lanka, Czechs versus Slovaks in the old Czechoslovakia, and Hutu versus Tutsi in Rwanda and

Burundi. Dual societies do not have enough political space for alliances and coalitions, and therefore not enough space for compromise and accommodation.

One solution for Rwanda and Burundi is to federate them with Tanzania and make the Hutu and Tutsi part of a wider plural society. The separate armies for Rwanda and Burundi, and for the Tutsi and the Hutu, would need to be dissolved. As part of Tanzania the Hutu and Tutsi would discover how much they have in common, and possibly form a political alliance among themselves against other Tanzanians in the legitimate political process.

Is there a precedent for this? And the answer is YES. Uganda has Hutu and Tutsi of its own - only they pass under different names. The Ugandan Tutsi are called Hima, of whom President Museveni is one. The Ugandan Hutu are called the Iru. On most issues in Uganda politics the Hima and Iru have rallied together under the collective name of Banyankole.

In other words, in pluralistic Uganda, the Hima and Iru have had enough political space to form legitimate alliances against other Ugandans. But in dualistic Rwanda and Burundi there has not been enough political space for compromise between the Hutu and the Tutsi.

Federation with Tanzania would open up such possibilities. The United States should lead the way with inducements not only to Hutu and Tutsi, but also to Tanzania to make it

worth Tanzania's while. Above all the United States should make available its immense experience - however troubled - in the constant give-and-take of the politics of federalism.

Towards the Future

American policies in the Middle East have often hurt Africa. American Embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam were bombed in 1998 because of U.S. policies in the Middle East - resulting in the deaths of hundreds of East Africans. America's uncritical support of Israel has led to anti-Israeli terrorism in Africa, often killing many more East Africans than either Israelis or Americans. Africa is hurting because of the United States' blunders in the Middle East.

But will American policies in Africa, on the other hand, help the United States' humanitarianism in the Middle East? The Bush administration has declared war not only on terrorism but also on AIDS and HIV. The war on terrorism is targeted especially on the Middle East, but is also hurting Africa. The war on AIDS and HIV is targeted especially on Africa but may deepen American humanitarianism in the Middle East.

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An even larger picture is whether the United States' penetration of Africa is inaugurating the third major wave of alien penetration of Africa - on top of the first waves of Islam and the Arabs, and the second wave of the impact of Europeans on the African continent.

Across the centuries Africa has been both enriched and damaged by the historic interaction with the Arabs and Islamic culture. More recently Africa has been both enriched and damaged by the impact of European power and life-styles. Are we now facing the American phase of alien power in Africa? Should we say "Halleluia! The Lord be praised!"? Or should we groan "God help us!"? It could go either way! America is both a horrendous peril and a humane

promise to history and destiny. *The author is an Albert Schweitzer Professor in the Humanities and Director of the Institute of Global Cultural Studies at Binghamton University, New York. Dr. Mazrui is also an Albert Luthuli Professor-at-Large in the Humanities and Development Studies at the University of Jos in Nigeria. He is the Andrew D. White Professor-at-Large Emeritus and Senior Scholar in Africana Studies at Cornell University and Ibn Khaldun Professor-at-Large, Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences, Leesburg, Virginia. A revised presentation of this article was delivered at a conference on "Africa in the 21st Century" held on May 10, 2003 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, Massachusetts.*