

Leadership in Africa

By Robert I. Rotberg



Africa's rampant conflict (in recent months in the western Sudan and in Uganda) and strikingly slow economic development (as compared to Asia and Latin America) stems in large part from poor governance and deficient leadership. Because of weak economies and weak institutions, and too many small land-locked nation-states, leadership matters more in Africa than it does elsewhere.

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functioning rule of law; political freedoms; a framework conducive to economic growth and prosperity; effective arteries of commerce such as roads and air communications; schooling; health services; and a method of regulating the environmental commons. They also empower civil society. Crucially, good leaders provide their citizens with a sense of belonging proudly to an ongoing national enterprise. They seek to be remembered for how they have bettered the lives of the ruled rather than enhanced the fortunes of the few.

Good leaders produce results, whether in terms of improved

standards of living, basic development indicators, abundant new sources of personal opportunity, enriched educational opportunities, skilled medical care, freedom from crime, or strengthened infrastructures. Bad and despicable leaders—and Africa has known its Mobutu Sese Sekos and Idi Amins—tear down the social and economic fabric of their lands; they impoverish and immiserate their increasingly downtrodden inhabitants. Bad rulers oppress their peoples, depriving them of liberty, prosperity, and happiness.

Botswana is one of Africa's paragons of democracy and development. Long before its diamonds were discovered, the dirt-poor desert protectorate demonstrated an affinity for participatory governance, integrity, tolerance of difference and dissent, entrepreneurial initiative, and the rule of law. Botswana's comparative linguistic homogeneity, tradition of responsible chieftainship, small population, and susceptibility to missionary influence all doubtless played a part in fashioning the Botswanan difference, but individual leadership decisions were formative.

Seretse Khama, the country's first president, set the tone. From a family of chiefs well regarded for their benevolence and integrity, Khama believed strongly in those values of

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deliberative democracy and market economic performance that proved a recipe for his young country’s political, social, and economic successes. He may have acquired some of those values at the University in South

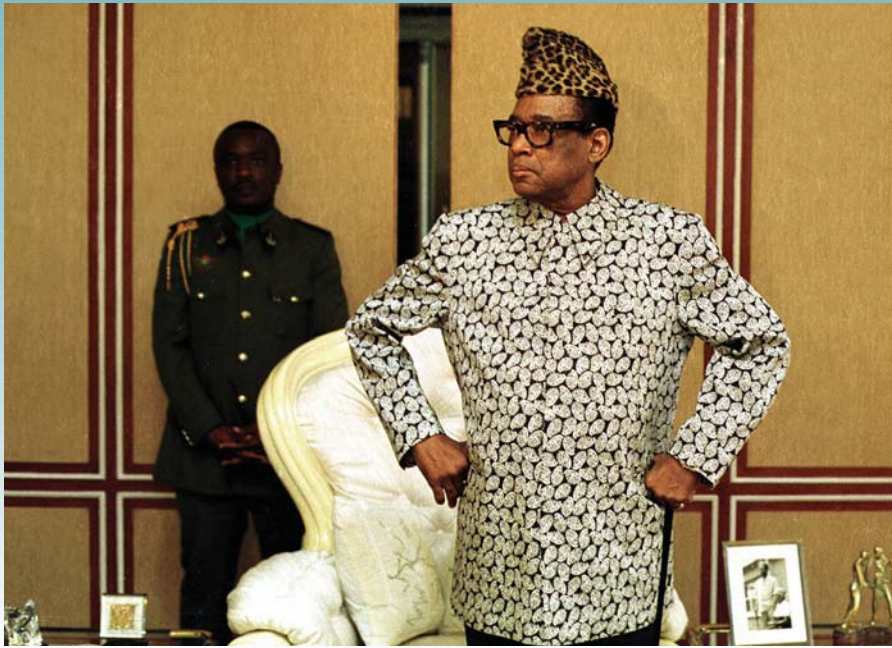
Africa and Britain, but many were intrinsic to his character. Nature and nurture reinforced each other.

Modest, with few narcissistic traits, non-ostentatious as chief and leader (unlike to many of his African

contemporaries), and conscious of achieving an enduring legacy, Khama was able, almost alone of the first rulers of independent Africa, to forge a political culture—a system of values governing the conduct of political affairs—that has endured during the peaceful presidencies of Sir Ketumile Masire and Festus Mogae, his successors. It is no wonder that Botswana has consistently been well governed, non-corrupt, and for two decades the fastest growing country per capita on the African mainland.

In very different circumstances, Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, the first leader of Mauritius (an offshore member of the African Union), operated under the same internalized leadership rules as Khama. When Ramgoolam became prime minister at independence in 1968, he understood that his island nation’s rainbow of colors and peoples—a plurality of Tamil-speaking Hindu Indians, Urdu-and Hindi-speaking Muslims from India and Pakistan, Chinese, and indigenous Creole-speaking Franco-Mauritians, most of whom were descended from slaves—could not long survive in peace if he or others ruled in any other than a fully transparent and democratic manner. He stressed open politics, welcomed a free press, and strengthened the rule of law. He also sensed that Mauritius needed an open economy. Soon Mauritius became a major textile and wool fabric manufacturer, despite the absence of cotton or sheep on the island.

In the case of Mauritius, as in



Botswana, principled leadership came first. It permitted good governance, which in turn enabled economic growth and prosperity. After Botswana, Mauritius for two decades has been the fastest growing African economy per capita.

High quality democratic leadership was essential to both success stories. Likewise, without Nelson Mandela's inclusive leadership, black-run South Africa after 1994 would have emerged from apartheid more fractured and less peaceful. Mandela's vision insisted on full rights for the majority, but without too abrupt a removal of minority economic privileges. Mandela's South Africa strengthened the rule of law, greatly broadened the delivery of essential services, and slowly shifted away from the dominant command economy toward one that was more market driven.

Mandela, Khama, and Ramgoolam

all led their nations in a participatory fashion when they could easily have aggregated personal power. They demonstrated what few of their fellow African leaders then or since have demonstrated: that Africans are perfectly capable of building states, even nations, developing sustainable political cultures, and modernizing and growing their economies effectively. Given these individuals' diverse human and ethnic backgrounds, and given their respective nations' different colonial legacies, it makes no sense to assert that traditional African culture somehow inhibits the exercise of democratic leadership.

Yet, when so many other African presidents have begun as democrats, only to emerge as corrupt autocrats, there must be some greed for overweening power or massive wealth that drives such as former President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya,

President Bakili Muluzi of Malawi, former President Frederick Chiluba of Zambia, President Omar Bongo of Gabon, and President Paul Biya of Cameroon to abuse the prerogatives of office and turn against their own peoples.

The most egregious of all of these African democratic pretenders is President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, who shifted from being a constitutionally abiding democrat to become a violently aggressive despot, in the process driving his once prosperous country into penury and his people to the edge of starvation. No other African tyrant, and there have been many, has so thoroughly destroyed a once well-managed and well-educated country.

Is there some law of diminished accountability that prevails in Africa? Is the reverence for African chieftainship at fault? Is it because of weaknesses in civil society? Or is it the sheer rawness of democracy in Africa, and the absence of a long period of preparation for participatory government? Africa certainly lacks a business class that is independent of government and capable of thriving without patronage. That societal absence may accentuate Africa's zero-sum mentality, and fuel a preference for self-enrichment.

Whatever the root cause of this malaise, African middle classes understand that their leaders have served them and their countries poorly. They want improved leadership. Responsive to that widespread sentiment, and conscious of the danger

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to Africa of men like Mugabe, a group of Africa's best present and former senior leaders—men in the mold of Khama and Ramgoolam—recently decided to take action.

Led by Masire, the second president of Botswana, they agreed to confront Africa's pathology of poor stewardship by deeds as well as words. They have established an African

Leadership Council, promulgated a Code of African Leadership (with twenty-three commandments), and proposed a series of courses to train their successors in the arts of good leadership and government.

The African Leadership Council and its code (intended to set standards) and training program are attempts to propagate a greater awareness of good

leadership, to build upon the Mandela-Khama-Ramgoolam model, and to reinvigorate African leadership capacity almost from scratch. The Council intends its initiative to be more transformative than the much publicized plans for peer review of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), and to goad faltering leaders to attend to the needs of their peoples and not themselves.

This is a tall order for contemporary Africa, but these uncommonly bold leaders (including the current vice-president of Kenya, a former head of state of Nigeria, and several prime ministers and a clutch of cabinet ministers, in addition to Masire) have the prestige and esteem to make a major difference. If they do, Africa can begin to catch up with Asia. Then all of Africa's many abused peoples can begin to feel as free and empowered as those who live in contemporary Botswana, Mauritius, and South Africa.

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