

The Impact of Obama's Election on Democracy and Governance Discourse in Africa

Zine Magubane

This paper argues that the financial crises in the United States and globally have opened up the possibility for thinking quite differently about the role of the state in governance, the role of the state in development, and the interface between the two. For the first time in a very long time, Americans are being forced to reconsider certain cherished orthodoxies about market fundamentalism, neo-liberalism, the role of the state in the economy, and the relationship between the free market and democracy. This much more than Obama's or ethnic background is where the potential arises for a rethinking of how his ascent to power might impact democracy and governance discourse in Africa. African leaders have the opportunity to use this moment of questioning as a way of opening the avenue for a different set of questions to be asked about the intersection between democracy and economic development, the role of the state in the economy, and the possibilities for the emergence and survival of democratic developmental states across the globe.

Introduction

An insightful book on the role of race in American foreign policy by Nikhil Singh (2004, 7) makes the point that, "with the onset of the Cold War, U.S. State Department officials routinely argued that white supremacy was the 'Achilles' heel of U.S. foreign relations. From the highest levels of government and social policy, it appeared that the stability of the expanded American realm of action in the world was linked to the resolution of the crisis of racial discord and division at home."

¹ The election of Barack Obama was seen by many

as an indication that the crisis of racial discord that Singh references had been resolved. As such, it also signaled that the USA was now poised to legitimately claim the role of global hegemon. In other words, "black inclusion in the nation state [as] an index of U.S. world-ordering power" (Singh 2004, 136). A number of commentaries that appeared right after Obama was elected president point to precisely this fact, as newspaper pundits and ordinary citizens alike heralded Obama's election as having renewed America's legitimacy on the world stage. On 5 November 2009, just one day after the election, the *New York Times* ran

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an article entitled, “For Many Abroad, an Ideal Renewed,” wherein the author, Ethan Bronner, opined,

The world’s view of an Obama presidency presents a paradox. His election embodies what many consider unique about the United States — yet America’s sense of its own specialness, of its destiny and mission, has driven it astray, they say. They want Mr. Obama, the beneficiary and exemplar of American exceptionalism, to act like everyone else, only better, to shift American policy and somehow to project both humility and leadership.¹

This statement was followed by a quote from Francis Nyamnjoh, a Cameroonian novelist and social scientist who agreed that, “for America to choose as its citizen in chief such a skillful straddler of global identities could not help but transform the nation’s image, making it once again the screen upon which the hopes and ambitions of the world are projected.”²

These statements encapsulate the multiplicity of factors that will, together, work to determine the possible impact of Obama’s election on democracy and governance discourse in Africa. On the one hand, there is the inescapable fact that Obama is a member of the African diaspora, who traces his roots to Kenya. This, many people feel, will render him more sympathetic to African concerns and more open to new types of relationships with African nations. They also imagine that he might pave the way for a more egalitarian, less exploitative, relationship between Africa, the USA and perhaps even the ‘West’ in general. We cannot forget, however, that Obama is the president of the United States of America, possibly the greatest imperial power in world history. We must remain cognisant of the “nature of the US as a state and the character of the American presidency” (Mutua 2008, 25).³ Indeed, as Aimé Césaire (1972, 60) warned in *Discourse on Colonialism*,

I know that some of you, disgusted with Europe, with all that hideous mess which you did not witness by choice, are turning — oh! in no great numbers — toward America and getting used to looking upon that country as a possible liberator... And there we are, ready to run the great Yankee risk. So, once again, be careful! American domination — the only domination from which one never recovers. I mean, from which one never recovers unscarred.⁴

Obama is charged, first and foremost, with making sure that American interests are protected at

all costs. As an editorial in the 2 June 2008 edition of *The Standard*, a Kenyan newspaper, explained, “Obama may be good for Africa, but first and foremost he is an American. He is unlikely to jeopardise American interests in trying to help others (Ikunda 2008, 10).”⁵ This opinion was seconded by Makau Mutua, writing in the Kenyan newspaper, *The Daily Nation*. Mutua (2008, 25) makes the point that “the American president has two basic duties — develop and implement a foreign policy to enhance US interests, and pursue a domestic policy that will bring economic prosperity to the nation. ...In foreign policy, there is only one basic question: Is the president going to keep America the strongest nation on earth?”⁶

Thus, when we turn to the question of what impact Obama’s election is likely to have on governance and democracy discourse in Africa, we should consider whether there are any points of convergence between the two duties Mutua points to and, further, what those points of convergence might mean for Africa. The relationship between domestic economic policies and foreign policy is particularly relevant because Obama was sworn into office during what most people agree is the worst economic crisis in America since the Great Depression. Two months before Obama was elected, his advisor on Africa, Whitney W Schneidman (2008), wrote a guest column on *allAfrica.com* entitled, “Africa: Obama’s Three Objectives for the Continent.” In the article, he noted that, “The experience of Barack Obama has raised extraordinary expectations in Africa. We need to be realistic about these expectations, especially given the financial pressures in the U.S.”⁷

While it is true that the financial pressures faced by the USA may render it less able to accommodate African calls for a transformed relationship between Africa and the USA, nevertheless, we should not blind ourselves to the opportunities that this financial crisis in the USA and globally has opened up for thinking quite differently about the role of the state in governance, the role of the state in development, and the interface between the two. The collapse of several major banks, the crisis facing major auto makers like General Motors, rising unemployment, falling stock prices, the sub-prime mortgage crisis, and the general feeling amongst Americans that the wealthy individuals who worked on Wall Street benefited at the expense of the average man or woman who worked on Main Street, has led Americans to seriously reconsider the role of the state in the economy. This, much more than Obama’s race or ethnic background, is where the potential arises for a rethinking of how his ascent to power might impact democracy and

governance discourse in Africa. For the first time in a very long time, Americans are being forced to reconsider certain cherished orthodoxies about market fundamentalism, neo-liberalism, the role of the state in the economy, and the relationship between the free market and democracy. African leaders thus have the opportunity to use this moment of questioning as a way of opening the avenue for a different set of questions to be asked about the intersection between democracy and economic development, the role of the state in the economy, and the possibilities of the emergence and survival of democratic developmental states across the globe.

'Good Governance': The History of an Idea

From the advent of colonialism onwards there has been a 'twinning' of democracy and governance on the one hand, and development on the other, in Western-produced discourse about Africa. During the colonial era, for example, this was encapsulated in the mantra of 'Christianity, Civilisation and Commerce.' Christianity was posited as the means whereby Africans would not only come to embrace God, but also would learn to accept and embrace European habits of industry. Missionaries and colonial officials argued that African rulers were despots and tyrants responsible for continuing the slave trade. Thus, they posited that deposing these rulers and placing Africans under colonial rule was the necessary precondition for replacing the slave trade with legitimate trade, slavery with wage (i.e. 'free' labour), and self-provisioning economies with commodity and currency based ones. Thus, in colonial discourse, capitalism was equated with moral salvation *and* democracy, as colonialism was considered the necessary precondition for Africans to obtain the level of citizenship that would allow them to, one day (in the very far distant future), govern themselves.

As a result, the struggle for independence was conceived by many African nationalists as a simultaneous struggle for economic and political sovereignty. The nationalist vision called out for a radical transformation of the economy and society. The state was looked at as the agency for the dissemination of both democracy and development. Democratic governance, according to many nationalist elites, would be impossible to achieve without an active and interventionist developmental state. These attempts to rearticulate both the terms and definitions of democracy and development met serious challenges, however. The

immediate post-independence period dovetailed with the Cold War, which profoundly disfigured the governance, democracy and development discourse in Africa. During the Cold War, a number of one party regimes arose, which rationalised the curtailing of individual freedom and the instantiation of authoritarian rule as a necessary corollary of development. In other words, democratic governance and development were viewed as trade-offs.

New challenges also presented themselves in the form of the hegemonic dominance of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), which blamed both Africa's economic woes and the rise of authoritarian regimes on the growth of the state. The state was depicted as prone to excessive expansion which, in turn, provided a fertile breeding ground for both corruption and authoritarianism. Thus, they suggested that the answer lay in neo-liberal policies of marketisation, privatisation and liberalisation.

When one considers the ways in which international development organisations involved themselves in promoting both development and certain forms of governance in Africa, it is possible to view these foreign advisors and consultants as having taken over where the missionaries and colonial governors left off. The international financial institutions imposed structural adjustment, policies which harnessed political conditionalities to economic ones in order to ensure that the private sector and not the state would be the engine of development. It was thus that the 'good governance' discourse was born. As Issa Shivji (2003) explained, "economic and political conditionalities, including those on good governance, are an expression of the reassertion of imperial domination, however it may be labeled. ...Neo-liberal politics, thrust down the throats of African people, is a corollary of the economic policies of the Structural Adjustment Programmes based on the Washington Consensus, mindlessly propagated and imposed by the World Bank and IMF."⁸ This has had very direct implications for democracy and governance discourses, as Khabede Matlosa (2005, 17) agrees,

The distinct impact of globalisation on governance is, among other things, the imposition of liberal democracy as the main political system that African states should embrace. The development challenge posed by globalisation relates to, inter alia, the free enterprise economic model as the main economic system for Africa to pursue. This, in essence, suggests that globalisation sets parameters for sovereignty of the nation-state and, in turn, limits Africa's agenda for both governance

and development. It becomes a tale of the power relations between industrialised states and underdeveloped states in determining the shape and direction of the global political economy. As the old international relations cliché goes, the rich and powerful do what they want, and the poor and weak do what they can.⁹

For some time it appeared as if the Washington Consensus and its attendant vision of what democracy and governance should mean in Africa and to Africans was invulnerable to attack. As time went on, however, and increasing numbers of economies across the developing world fell into crisis, the economic orthodoxies of the IMF and World Bank became open to questioning. We are now poised at the dawn of a new era marked by the fact that the Washington Consensus has shown itself to be inadequate, not only in meeting the needs of the developing world, but inadequate in meeting the needs of Washington (i.e. America at large) as well. Although America is still rich and powerful compared to the African continent as a whole, the global financial crisis has also left Obama in the position of forcing the USA (particularly the business classes) to accept that America also must do what it can, rather than what it wants. Thus, Obama's election provides an ideal opening for rethinking the role of the state in development and how that, in turn, is tied to processes of democratic governance.

The Revival of Democracy and Governance Discourse in Africa

For a long time now, African leaders have been fighting for their right to assert that both development and democracy hinge on the state being able to play a larger and more varied role than neo-liberalism is prepared to allow. Now, Americans and the Western world at large are being forced to do the same. The global financial crisis, and the manner in which Obama is choosing to respond to it — more regulation, an expanded role for the state, a possible cap on the compensation and perks enjoyed by the scions of capitalism on Wall Street in order to create a more equitable society — indicate that the USA is, in many ways, in the midst of a transformation to a developmental state. Ake (2000, 290) defines a developmental state as one that “conceives its ‘mission’ as that of ensuring economic development.”¹⁰ As the 12 February 2009 *New York Times* described Obama's proposed \$789 billion stimulus package, designed to rescue America's sagging economy and provide

relief for millions of economically troubled citizens, “It hammered home the reality of a bigger, more activist government” (Stevenson 2009, A1).¹¹ Africans may find a sympathetic leader in Obama, not simply because of a shared ethnic/racial heritage, but also because of the common experience of engaging in a sustained ideological battle over the role of the state and the limits of the liberal democratic model for ensuring a just and equitable society. As the *New York Times* went on to note,

Mr. Obama prevailed, but not in the way he had hoped. His inability to win over more than a handful of Republicans amounted to a loss of innocence, a reminder that his high-minded calls for change in the practice of governance had been ground up in a matter of weeks by entrenched forces of partisanship and deep principled differences between left and right (Stevenson 2009, A1).¹²

Matlosa (2005, 7) makes the point that “African states need to move beyond liberal democracy to embrace and institutionalise social democracy which is, by far, more participative, inclusive, representative, accountable and social welfarist in both form and content.”¹³ For some time now, African scholars have argued that the liberal democratic model has serious limitations, elections are not synonymous with democratic governance, and the state should be devoted to ensuring a more equitable society. In order for the state to recognise its responsibility to play this activist role, despite the efforts of elite power brokers to capture the state for its own ends, it must remain responsive to a range of groups across civil society. Claude Ake (2000, 185), for example, has written that,

The democracy movement in Africa is being moved in the direction of a simple liberal democracy of multi-party electoral competition. The pressure to move in this direction will remain strong. But this is not the democracy that is most relevant to the social realities of contemporary Africa. Social democracy would be more feasible. Its advantages are an activist role for the state and strong commitment to social welfare. It places less emphasis on abstract political rights and more on concrete economic rights, and also on removal of conditions which block democratic participation, such as gross economic inequality.¹⁴

The authors of democracy and governance discourse in Africa need to take advantage of the fact that not only are neo-liberalism and the liberal democratic model in crisis, but also that the President of the United States is spear-heading

one of the most activist state regimes since Teddy Roosevelt signed the New Deal. The type of ideological space that exists now for talking about the significance of politics to the development process, for rethinking the intersection between the state and the market, and for moving the discourse of democracy beyond simply talking about elections, is unprecedented.

Obama rode to victory on a wave of popular support as many formerly marginal social groups — immigrants, the poor, African-Americans, Hispanics and the working classes — banded together. However, the mere fact of their democratic participation at the polls is not going to reverse their economic fortunes. Poverty and unemployment in the USA grows worse by the minute, threatening to eclipse the political ‘miracle’ of Obama’s electoral victory. Americans today find themselves in a situation not unlike South Africans in 1994 — being led by a much beloved and respected leader, heady with the emotion of a victory hard fought and won, but also facing an economic situation that borders on catastrophic. South Africans, Zimbabweans and Kenyans’ (to name just a few) have learned through hard experience that the discourse of democracy and governance must go beyond a simple concern with elections and popular representation, and embrace the issue of economic justice. As Shivji (2003) put it,

The struggle for democracy is primarily a political struggle on the form of governance, thus involving the reconstitution of the state. No one claims that democracy means and aims at social emancipation. Rather, it is located on the terrain of political liberalism so, at best, creating conditions for the emancipatory project. This is important to emphasise in the light of the hegemony of neo-liberal discourse which tends to emasculate democracy of its social and historical dimensions and present it as an ultimate nirvana.¹⁵

Shivji (2003) goes on to argue that, “what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ governance thus turns out to be a moral judgment on the one hand, and relativist and subjectivist on the other. The result, I want to suggest, is that ‘good governance’ has no conceptual or theoretical value in understanding a phenomenon with a view to changing it.”¹⁶ While I agree that the concept of good governance, as it has been employed up until now by the proponents of neo-liberalism, is of debatable theoretical value, the concept does have enormous conceptual value. What ‘good governance’ might mean is currently open to debate on the global stage as more and more developed nations are finding it hard

to reconcile respect for liberal democracy (even quite narrowly defined) with the rampant and growing inequality within their societies. Thus, the time is ripe for Africans to reassert many of the discourses on democracy and governance that intellectuals and leaders on the Continent and in the diaspora have been asserting for some time. Thus, we should boldly reassert and reconfirm the veracity of the claim that liberal democracy is the entry point rather than the end goal of an inclusive and democratic society; that economic rights and political rights are basically inseparable; and that ‘good governance’ can only exist and grow when nurtured by an activist, developmental state that works to direct and discipline the market so that equity, rather than inequality, is the concomitant of economic growth.

Conclusion: Learning from Cesaire

When *Discourse on Colonialism* was published, it was notable not only for the radical and uncompromising stance it took towards colonialism, but also for the bold and original claim that Nazism, rather than an historical aberration, was nothing more than colonialism and imperialism come home. As Cesaire (1972, 14) put it, Hitler “applied to Europe colonial procedures which, until then, had been reserved for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.”¹⁷ We might see the current global financial crisis in similar ways. In other words, the financial deregulation, marketisation, privatisation and neo-liberalism policies that the USA and Western Europe heralded as a panacea for Africa are finally having an impact at home.

The worsening unemployment in Europe and America is not unlike the unemployment that has plagued African nations for decades. The scandals involving wealthy financiers who bilked innocent people out of millions can easily be likened to the kinds of corrupt business dealings practiced by the comprador elite across the Continent. Likewise, American artists are finally experiencing the kind of pain that African artists have endured for some time, as funding for everything from elementary arts education to the Guggenheim museum dries up. African professors and elementary school teachers alike are quite familiar with the situations being faced by educators — whether they are elementary school teachers or Harvard professors — who face cutbacks in salary, hiring freezes and job insecurity as a result of financial dealings that took place far outside their realm of control.

In an interview with René Depestre, the Haitian poet Cesaire explained how he had wanted

to break free from French literary traditions but “did not actually free myself from them until the moment I decided to turn my back on poetry. In fact, you could say I became a poet by renouncing poetry” (Cesaire 1972, 66).¹⁷ Similarly, the authors of democracy and governance discourse in Africa should, like Cesaire, turn their backs on the discourse and renounce it — at least in its current form. Like Cesaire, they must seek to revive their own indigenous understandings and reassert their faith in their own critics. Perhaps it is only by turning our backs on democracy and governance discourse that we will be able to finally save it.

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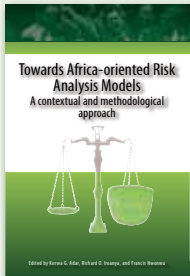
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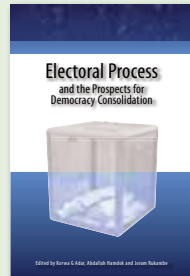
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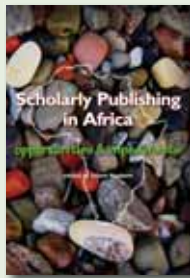
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ISSN 1998-7994



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