

Is the West Responsible for African Political Problems?

by Michael Curtis



Bobi Wine

The unsuccessful candidate for the presidency has called on the Supreme court to nullify the election result. He charged that the election was rigged. He was prevented from campaigning, he and his supporters were attacked, his bodyguard was killed by soldiers. The campaign was shortened by 3 months, making it more difficult for the opposition to mobilize its supporters. The military supervised the polling stations, opposition leaders were arrested, peaceful protests and opposition rallies were blocked. Journalists were detained. Opposition candidates were restricted from meeting with the media. A law of 2020 imposed a daily tax on social media and required users to obtain a license, and to

agree not to engage in distortion of facts or put out content likely to create public insecurity.

Though this state of affairs may appear to resemble politics in Washington, D.C. it actually applies to Uganda, where the presidential and legislative election took place on January 14, 2021. The incumbent president, Yoweri Museveni, the 76 year-old former guerrilla leader who seized power in 1986 and has been elected five times, was seeking his sixth term in office. Age limits and term limits as qualifications for the position in Uganda had been removed. In a turnout of 59%, the official result for president was 58.38 % for Museveni, National Resistance Movement, NRM, to 35.08 % for the main opposition leader Bobi Wine, the 38 year-old reggae star, National Unity Platform, NUP. The parliamentary result for the 529 seats was 316 for NRM, and 61 for NUP.

The defeated Bobi Wine has filed a petition with Uganda's supreme court calling for the nullification of the re-election of Museveni, whom he accused of being an agent of violence.

Wine was not only critical of the corruption and bad government of the regime. He declared the election was stolen. He was banned from using social media and messages. At times he wore a bullet proof vest and a helmet. There was intimidation from security forces. The military stuffed ballot boxes and cast votes for the candidate of the regime. Wine released a list of 243 people who were abducted by security forces, and said that at least 3000 of his supporters were detained before and after the election of January 14.

Observers noted that Uganda opposition candidates, 11 in all, were repeatedly detained, threatened, and prevented from campaigning. Their supporters were harassed, beaten, and some were killed. However, the starting problem for Wine's call for nullification of the official result is that the members of the Supreme court were appointed by Museveni and will uphold the incumbent.

Comments from foreign observers and organizations generally support Museveni's position.

The U.S. is considering action against Museveni who has been a considerable beneficiary of American aid. The Parliament of the EU, concerned by the continued harassment of political actors in Uganda, passed a resolution that the election was not democratic and not transparent, and that the security and armed forces and police had used excessive force in the election. It was critical of the growing interference of security forces in the political process.

The Uganda election was shameful in its unfairness and use of violence against opponents of the ruler, but unfairness is not unique in African regimes most of which are authoritarian, intolerant and hostile to dissenters, and in which young people have difficulties in political participation. This latter point is becoming more important since Africa has the world's largest population of young people; the median age is 20. Projections are that by 2050 Africa will have a population of 2.5 billion, the majority of whom will be young people. The aging authoritarian rulers will have to include young people, presumably more open to democratic ideas and policies, in the political and economic system.

Is political change likely in African countries? No simple answer is possible in the continent of 54 states which differ on the quality of governance and extent of democracy, and which are plagued by continuing conflict, political instability, and corruption. Africa is still fundamentally troubled by what one may call the politicization of ethnicity or the ethnicization of politics.

After independence of African countries from colonial rule, democracy did not flourish and rulers came to power through coups or as warlords, or as charismatic personalities. There was an urgent need to create a unified society of the existing tribal arrangements to prevent secession, to agree on

acceptable territorial boundaries, and establish a stabilized infrastructure while maintaining some traditional norms. The post-colonial regimes, almost all of which can be characterized as authoritarian or “hybrid democracies,” varied from the quasi-totalitarian system like that of Idi Amin , the “butcher of Uganda,” brutal despot, to so-called traditional African democracy, “government by discussion as opposed to government by force” of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, to one party systems in Ivory Coast under Felix Houphouet-Boigny or in Malawi, under Dr. Banda, president for life.

The country most commonly viewed as democratic in character is Mauritius with its four communities or ethnic groups, unicameral parliamentary system, stable multiparty system, civil liberties, and peaceful transfer of political power. After Mauritius as a democracy is Botswana, with eight main tribes, which tolerates opposition, has relatively little violence, and also has a tradition, if limited, of peaceful transfer of power.

There are 12 more national elections in Africa slated to be held in 2021, the first in Somalia and then the Republic of Niger. The election in Somali has been delayed because of the spread of Covid-19 and the civil war caused by the al-Qaeda Islamist group. The election in Niger scheduled for February 21, 2021, a run-off presidential election because no candidate on the first ballot got the necessary 50% vote, may be significant. The incumbent who had seized power in a military coup in 2010 announced he was stepping down after 2 five-year terms. The new election constitutes the first democratic, peaceful transition of power in the history of Niger since complete independence from France in 1960.

A second possible change may occur as the result of the parliamentary election in Ethiopia on June 5, 2021. In this country of 116 million, the event is supposed to be the country’s first genuine competitive multiparty election. Will the election be one of real popular participation and

representation, promised by Abiy Ahmed who became PM in April 2018, or remain subject to authoritarianism? Will there be a free flow of information and the Internet, now that bans on political parties have been lifted, or shutdowns and media blackouts? A fundamental problem may result from the fact that Ethiopia is a country with a federal system with ten regional governments, many with border disputes ethnic rivalries, and some secessionist movements such as in the Tigray region where armed conflict has occurred.

Up to now many of the elections in Africa have been political theater, events to give legitimacy to leaders who lack a popular mandate. In some countries, including Algeria, Egypt, and the Democratic Republic of Congo there are no term limits on the occupant of power, though 21 African countries maintain some term limits. This has meant that some leaders or family dynasties have ruled for long periods. Ten have ruled for more than 20 years, and the longest, the dynasties in Gabon and Togo for 53 years. In a number of countries, opposition parties and critical media are banned. In five countries, Chad, Ethiopia, Libya, Niger, and Somalia, the election will take place in the midst of armed conflict. However, some countries Rwanda and Uganda, have allowed dissent, and have some seats in parliament reserved for women and minorities.

Why has authoritarian politics persisted in Africa rather than movement to democratic systems? In this moment of BLM protests in Western countries, it is pertinent to ask the questions ,the degree to which the past colonialism by the western countries is central to Africa's problems and to the failure to create viable democratic institutions. Should the West be held responsible for the prevalence of authoritarian systems, one party states, military rule, and personal dictatorships, and did it have a negative effect on political development?

Certainly, the colonial powers exploited African wealth and resources and benefited economically and strategically, obtaining raw materials such as cotton, copper, and iron ore,

and used cheap and forced labor on a large scale. Their activity led to degradation of natural resources, soil erosion, changes in social systems, urbanization, artificial creation of colonial boundaries, imposition of leadership, tribal communities moved and relocated, and disregard of local culture. But colonialism also meant medical and educational improvement, building of an infrastructure of transport and communication, and a monetary economy. The British rule introduced new political ideas, a written constitution, separation of powers, parliamentary systems, parties and elections, a common legal system, an organized civil service, independent courts, and a partly free press.

The positive and negative aspects of colonialism in Africa remain controversial. The crucial problem remains. Why did democracy not flourish after independence?