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# Africa's Leadership Conundrum

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When the Mo Ibrahim Foundation announced in February 2017 that there was no winner of the Foundation's 2016 Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, the news had a familiar ring to it. Since the annual Prize for outstanding leadership by a former African head of government was established in 2006 by the wealthy Sudanese-born businessman Mohammed Ibrahim, it has been awarded only four times.

Despite the mantra of "Africa Rising" that took hold over the past decade to date, there is no denying that African countries, with few exceptions, have been afflicted by a crisis of leadership. That crisis has progressively become more acute after the era of decolonization in the 1950s and 60s when the political struggle to break the

yoke of Western colonial oppression focused minds and threw up an abundance of leadership talent. Today, a quarter century after the end of the Cold War, and with a vast majority of Africa's countries officially democracies, the continent's elected and unelected leaders have largely proved

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unable to achieve high standards of governance as an outcome of leadership, and economic transformation as an outcome of effective governance.

And yet, the continent unquestionably abounds with leadership talent. The problem is that, while effective leaders are plenty in the realms of entrepreneurship, the professions, and civil society in Africa, transformational leadership ability has yet to become dominant in the cohort of political leadership, which is the focus of this essay.

### THE ROOTS OF THE PROBLEM

Addressing Africa's leadership challenge successfully will require accurate insight into the roots of the conundrum the continent appears to face today—one in which its countries remain relatively poor, economically and technologically, in a globalized world defined by competitiveness in wealth creation rather than the strategic imperatives of world politics of a bygone era such as the Cold War. In that era, these imperatives defined the influence and relevance of several nations beyond their economic wealth. This was the world in which Africa came of age. But the leadership African countries need today is one that can stabilize, develop, and modernize them economically and technologically in order to improve the living standards of their citizens and become more competitive in a global context.

Against this backdrop, the root cause of Africa's leadership conundrum lies in sub-optimal understandings, and thus applications, of the meaning of leadership. A leader leads based on how he/she understands leadership. There are historical, cultural, sociological, and philosophical dimensions of this reality. Leadership, to begin with, must be defined in connection with achievement and results including and going beyond a process of governance. Leadership, therefore, means the ability to set out a vision of a desired state of things, set priorities, take risks, and mobilize society toward achieving such a desired end state.

#### *The Historical Context*

The definition and understanding of leadership may be quite different from what African countries today require of their leaders. Thus, although the word "leadership" is now in vogue, many African countries still have "rulers" rather than leaders. It does not matter that many of these countries may be democracies in a formalistic sense. As one practical example, the main priority of heads of state and government in Africa in the 1970s and the 1980s was to obtain political power for its own sake—mainly through

coups d'état—and to keep it for as long as possible. Development of strong institutions—an important instrument of effective leadership—was not seen as a priority. We can identify three cultural “understandings” that lie at the root of African leadership styles.

### *The Cultural Context*

#### *“Us versus Them”*

This is the problem of ethnic, religious, or other atomistic-identity based factionalism that defines the acquisition or exercise of political power in African countries. It is present even in mature democracies and economically advanced countries such as the United States, Belgium, and Spain. Yet, because these countries have already achieved advanced economic progress, this is simply an imperfection or a characteristic in their democracies. In Africa, it is a foundational problem that has prevented the development of exceptional leadership.

Many African countries remain internally divided by ethnic and religious identities in their populations. The effect of these divisions on leadership selection and practice is that contests for political power in democracies on the continent are based not on ideology or clearly articulated leadership goals, but are in reality contests for ethnic or religious dominance. Political power obtained on this basis can hardly be exercised as transformational leadership. This breeds a “governance” culture of patronage based on divisive identities.

#### *Authority versus Service*

In many African pre-colonial cultures, the power of traditional kings was absolute. This cultural reality has not adapted well to concepts of modern statehood, democracy, and the checks and balances offered by the separation of executive, judicial, and legislative power on the continent. Political leadership is thus often perceived in African countries more as authority than service, as raw power rather than responsibility. Being (in which achievement is identified as the position of privilege attained or occupied) is thus far more important than doing (results from leadership) and is often conflated with leadership. In this context, electoral accountability for the performance of leadership is often weak. This cultural reality, however, is beginning to change in a gradual but irreversible direction as democratic practice matures toward substance rather than the mere formality of holding elections.

This *authority versus service* conundrum is also reflected in a prevalent culture of sycophancy in political leadership. Few aides or government officials can provide independent-minded and objective advice to a superior at any level of authority and leadership. This culture of prioritizing a place in the good graces of a leader's ego over actual work performance creates a strong incentive for leadership failure. ("L'etat c'est moi" ("I am the State"), as the French King Louis XIV famously stated. Many African presidents in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, elected or not, have this mindset.)

### *Loyalty versus Competence*

Loyalty is admittedly a characteristic that leaders everywhere, in both developed and developing countries, treasure. But the difference between good and bad governance is the context in which loyalty is demanded or displayed. Because leadership in Africa is based more on the authority syndrome than on the concept of accountable public service and was often insecure because of unconstitutional changes of government, African political leaders place a high premium on personal loyalty above all else in choosing their aides and in political appointments to important state institutions. Often, personal loyalty is reified above competence because African leaders want to feel secure in the loyalty of subordinates with whom the leader is personally acquainted.

This approach to leadership distorts the concept, for it makes capacity, ability, and competence secondary or even completely irrelevant in personnel selection. The direct consequence is that few leaders of African states are able to translate their authority into a sense of responsibility to rack up transformational achievements. Addressing the fundamental challenge of economic development requires a clear vision that is backed up by diffused leadership ability and technocratic competence in the cabinet and other subordinate levels of public service.

### *The Sociological Context*

The main sociological cause of poor leadership in Africa today is corruption and a perversion of the social values and mores of traditional African society. Because institutions are too weak, together with a sense of informed entitlement to self-aggrandizement to call an African president to account, the "Us versus Them" syndrome provides a strong incentive for corrupt practice by many African leaders. That of power versus responsibility legitimizes the practice. A "leader" who is focused on deploying the

authority of his office for self-enrichment not only provides a bad example of leadership for the development of a leadership culture but also robs his or her country and its citizens of public resources that could be deployed more beneficially as a public good or investment.

Corruption is a major reason for Africa's underdevelopment relative to the rest of the world. The phenomenon lies at the core of governance processes in several African countries instead of the periphery. This reality renders governance incapable of achieving transformational outcomes. The payment of bribes to access public services is common in some of the continent's largest economies such as Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya where corruption has held back development. Corruption is not just a foundational cause of poor leadership in Africa; the failure of many countries afflicted by the scourge to fight it is one of the most glaring indictments of leadership failure.

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### ***The Philosophical Context***

There is a fundamental connection between mindsets, or worldviews to use a philosophical phrase, and why a majority of African nations have remained poor despite being "endowed" with natural resources. Although the continent is emerging as a place of opportunity, it is not yet rising in a real economic sense despite the illusions induced by the commodities boom. The fundamental reason why Africa is not rising, and cannot rise unless it addresses this deficit, is that the countries of the continent are not driven by any discernible worldview.

Developing and inculcating a worldview is the ultimate task of political leadership. A worldview is a reflection of the inner world of the mind of an individual or a society and how this relates to the world around us. We project in our outward actions (or inactions) what is produced in our minds by this interaction. In turn, this influences our environment by creating certain realities. The immediate consequence of a conscious societal worldview is a well thought out strategy, with timeframes, a system of organization to achieve progress, and a value system that underpins this quest. The consequence of its absence is an inability to perceive trends and events accurately, low-level ambitions such as mere "survival," atomistic-identity

thinking that prioritizes the interests of a few rather than the many, and the resulting aimless drift.

Chu Okongwu, a former Minister of Finance and Economic Planning in Nigeria, writing on the importance of the worldview dimension of the leadership deficit in Africa, emphasized this link between leadership and worldviews, and the worldview responsibility of leadership:

Everyone, of course, has a worldview—some cohering [filtering, interpretive] view of the world [universe] and its jumble of events. However, important as these may be, we speak not of them. Rather, we refer to the admissible and ennobling “system worldview” of the helmsman [no gender bias] or optimal controller: his view of the place and role of his society in the global system. This includes correct perception, even if only in outlines, of present and probable future challenges and opportunity niches for the society...

The sound helmsman well understands that, no matter how valorous and dedicated he is in the goal pursuit process, by acting alone nothing can be achieved. Therefore, he mobilizes society to accept, indeed appropriate, his worldview through co-education. At the same time, he establishes solidarity with the polity by engaging in consensus building, reinforcing a perception of shared burdens, and continually demonstrating his commitment to the plan.

Without a worldview it would be impossible, so to speak, to establish measures of one’s location, ultimate objectives, economic-technological “distance” from other societies and performance of means; one would be, as it were, groping in the dark; at best, one would be essentially disoriented in the universe. In such an unfortunate case, the helmsman would quickly lapse into localism and primordiality, while the society, under pressure from a combination of factors such as technological backwardness, economic regress, increasing population but failing per capita incomes, would soon become mobilized against itself with serious portents.<sup>1</sup>

## CASE STUDIES IN LEADERSHIP IN AFRICA

Although Africa undoubtedly faces a challenge of transformational leadership in a majority of countries, there are several leadership success stories in the continent. We will examine some African countries and their leadership successes and challenges as case studies based on three leadership styles (a) authoritarian, (b) liberal, and (c) hybrid. Ethiopia and Rwanda will be assessed under (a), Botswana under (b), while Nigeria and South Africa will be examined under (c). The important lesson from these assessments is that, with outstanding leadership defined in a transformational

outcomes context, what really matters is not so much the political or economic model that is adopted, but the effectiveness of governance. It is also important to understand that each approach to leadership will have positives and negatives. Some more than others when measured from the standpoint of outcomes.

### *Ethiopia*

With 94 million people, Ethiopia is the second most populous country in Africa after Nigeria. Despite its geographic peculiarity as a land-locked country, Ethiopia has maintained an annual GDP growth rate between 8 percent and 11 percent for more than a decade. It is the fifth fastest growing economy of the International Monetary Fund's 188 member countries. The economy is driven largely by agriculture, on the back of which the country now seeks to achieve industrialization and export diversification, and services, which is now the main driver of growth.

The remarkable thing about Ethiopia's economic growth is that the country, unlike many others in the continent, is consciously strong, achieving inclusive growth, and avoiding the related trap of income inequality. According to the Central Intelligence Agency, "Ethiopia has the lowest rate of income inequality in Africa and one of the lowest in the world, with a Gini coefficient comparable to that of the Scandinavian countries."<sup>22</sup>

Poverty nevertheless remains a major problem, but Ethiopia is pursuing a growth strategy that will likely see it emerge as one of Africa's first truly globally competitive economies outside South Africa. This strategy is based on a five-year Growth and Transformation Plan that is focused on achieving industrialization and export diversification based on areas of comparative advantage, such as textiles and garments; leather goods such as shoes; and processed agricultural products.

These achievements are proceeding against the background of a most unconventional set of facts. Ethiopia runs a one-party political system and has a planned economy. As noted earlier, it is a land-locked country with rugged and difficult terrain. The country has also shunned the orthodoxies of western-inspired political and economic liberation. The government has microcredit industries for domestic investors, and foreign investment is pouring into Ethiopia's textiles, leather, commercial agriculture, light manufacturing, and tourism sectors.

Exceptional leadership is evidently at play. The components of that exceptionality include that most necessary ingredient of a foundational worldview anchored in an ancient history that dates back three million

years: Ethiopia has never been colonized. That worldview is one determined to succeed in a globalized world on its own terms. This perspective is backed up by a clear strategy and the discipline of execution, a strategic relationship with China that is yielding real benefits to the rare African country that knows exactly what it wants out of the relationship.<sup>3</sup> It has imbibed a focus on developing light manufacturing by positioning Ethiopia as a hub for economic activity for companies shifting away from China as a manufacturing base due to increasingly high wages in Asia. The country is investing heavily in acquiring and developing the skilled labor that will underpin this growth strategy.

The path to Ethiopia's contemporary success was set by Meles Zenawi, the country's prime minister from 1995 until his death in 2012, and the head of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, the ruling political party, since its formation in 1991. Meles was a visionary leader who combined political sagacity with a brilliant technocratic mind—a rare feature in Africa's leadership landscape. He purposefully set out to put Ethiopia on the path of transformation from its previous image as a backwater famous for famines and starvation in the 1980s to a developed and industrialized country, and championed the concept of the “developmental state” as a model on which an African Renaissance can be built.

Zenawi's legacy, however, remains controversial, and Ethiopia remains challenged by a specter of repression and human rights abuses. Clearly, a liberal society with freedoms of speech, association, and political orientation the East African country is not. One critical commentator on Zenawi's legacy argued that Zenawi was a paradoxical figure who embodied the traits of a brutal dictator and a politico-economic genius.<sup>4</sup>

It is striking that, rare for an African leader, Zenawi, in death as in his life, has retained the deep respect and admiration of several of his fellow leaders on the continent. His achievements and those of the even-keeled and less flamboyant Mr. Hailemariam Desalegn (Zenawi's Deputy Prime Minister and successor) are hard to ignore, but there can be no denying the challenge posed by ethnic tensions that led to widespread protests by the marginalized Oromo ethnic groups which constitute a third of Ethiopia's population, leading to the declaration of a state of emergency in the Oromia region.

The tensions could destabilize Ethiopia's growth trajectory if they are not well managed. Prime Minister Desalegn will likely superintend a gradual, controlled liberalization of Ethiopia's economy in the years ahead.<sup>5</sup> How successfully he can do this, while maintaining the cohesiveness of the Ethiopian State and its admirable economic trajectory, is the country's leadership challenge.



## *Rwanda*

Two decades ago, the East African nation of Rwanda was world-famous for one reason: genocide. Today, Rwanda has achieved continental and global recognition for other reasons: the country has the second highest “ease of doing business” ranking in Africa after Mauritius, according to the World Bank, and it takes only two procedures and three days to open a business in Rwanda. The country is positioned to become an African information technology hub, and over one million Rwandans have been pulled out of poverty over the past decade. Rwanda is the toast of foreign investors such as Starbucks, Visa Inc., and other corporations, and is targeting inflows of \$1.5 billion a year in foreign direct investment.<sup>6</sup>

Kigali, the capital city, is the cleanest in the continent—thanks to the orderly efficiency of Rwandan society and in part to the fact that, in order to prevent environmental degradation, one cannot enter the country with a plastic bag. Modern skyscrapers increasingly dot the Kigali skyline, and the country is clearly open for business.

Ethnic identification by Rwandans is banned. A strong effort to unify the country around the idea of Rwanda rather than ethnicity is on, with Tutsi genocide survivors living side by side with Hutus after international and local *gacaca* trials rendered justice to mass killers in the late 1990s and early 2000s. English, rather than the prior French, is now the country's official language, in a strategic break away from historical ties with Belgium and France, and unpleasant controversies over the roles of these two nations in the Rwandan civil war and genocide.

Rwanda today is largely the product one man's vision and grit, a so-far successful but still fragile experiment at transformational leadership in Africa out of the ashes of conflict and poverty. If the country is “Rwanda, Inc.,” Paul Kagame is its Chief Executive Officer, and he is committed to a “pro-poor” model of economic growth that prioritizes eradicating rural poverty based on a national Vision 2020 that is being implemented on target.<sup>7</sup> That Kagame has delivered returns to his country-corporation, and therefore is domestically popular, is beyond dispute, and he is eagerly observed as a leadership case study on the continent.

Kagame's leadership secret lies in his vision, iron discipline, pragmatism, and hands-on project management style that enables him to break down big projects into discrete chunks that must be delivered within clear timelines. He has proven astute at communicating his vision for Rwanda to the average citizen and mobilizing their participation in nation-building

through effective top-down organization, from the presidency down to the village cells in each rural area in the most remote parts of the country.

Rwanda's leader is a mixture of a technocrat and policy wonk, and a hands-on CEO-leader-manager that obsesses about performance targets and results. His emphasis on performance, which he monitors with signed formal goals—*imihigo*—that are akin to corporate performance contracts,<sup>8</sup> means that subordinates have little room for laxity. Non-performing officials are quickly relieved of their positions in Rwanda.

In the area of private sector-led economic development, Kagame encourages a liberal approach with a strong role for private sector leadership but still under the state's guiding hand. Nevertheless, in a unique play on state capitalism that is typically Kagame-esque in its originality, Rwanda's ruling party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), has controlling interests in certain business corporations, referred to as "party-statals" (a play on the more traditional state-owned parastatals). These business corporations, dominated by three investment companies—Crystal Ventures, Horizon Group, and Rwanda Investment Group—have been the subject of raised eyebrows in relation to their role vis-à-vis market asymmetry and corporate governance transparency.<sup>9</sup>

Rwanda may be the only African country in which the dominant political party directly owns and runs businesses. This has important implications for the evolution of private sector development in the country, even as Kagame is encouraging a greater degree of foreign investment in the economy outside of these hybrid party-state owned enterprises. Here again, it is instructive to see how Kagame has used political structures to create wealth—even if the ownership or deployment of this created wealth is not always clear—rather than the pure and corrupt rent-seeking and treasury-looting by political leaders and political parties that occur in most African countries.

Another aspect of Rwanda's leadership, one of fundamental relevance to Africa's true emergence on the global economic and political stage, is Kagame's attitude to foreign aid, which has broadly failed to achieve much in Africa beyond maintaining the aid-industrial complex in the Western world and incompetent leaders in several African countries who believe, vainly, that outside assistance is what will create prosperity for Africans. Rwanda has benefited from large amounts of foreign aid, to the tune of \$1 billion annually, and is viewed as the sub-Saharan Africa country that has utilized aid most efficiently and effectively.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Western governments and bureaucrats have viewed Kagame and his Rwanda as a great example of aid effectiveness.

Yet, Kagame is contemptuous of foreign aid, which he views, correctly, as detracting from the dignity of Africans, and has treated aid as a necessary but transient evil. He is systematically reducing his country's aid dependence, encouraging a self-confident culture of entrepreneurship in young Rwandans. Laden with bitter memories of the world's failure to intervene and stop the genocide of 1994 in his country, the Rwandan leader has little faith in the aspirational contraption known as the "international community."

While he has been adroit in exploiting the guilt of Western nations for their failure to stop the genocide and has been described as "the global elite's favorite strongman,"<sup>11</sup> Kagame's leadership worldview is one that is anchored on his perception of the needs of his people. That worldview proceeds from inside outwards in a competitive context in a globalized world and is self-confident enough not to crave the approval of the West. At the same time, he combines Rwandan core values with the best Western-style modern leadership and management thinking.

The Rwandan parliament recently amended the country's constitution to allow Kagame to run for a third seven-year term in office, and after that two further terms of five years each. Thus, Paul Kagame could be Rwanda's president until 2034. From an outsider's perspective, this ought to be a difficult judgment call for Rwanda's citizens, one between a leader who is providing effective and transformational leadership that is verifiable, but in a restricted political space and blooming political freedoms that might yield a return to divisive, ethnocentric politics that defined the country's past and makes it potentially unsafe for the minority Tutsi.

This brings up the unpleasant but practically necessary question of whether, whenever Kagame leaves office after a long period as Rwanda's helmsman, he will be succeeded by another Tutsi. Such a scenario, absent Kagame's uniqueness against the immediate historical backdrop of the 1994 genocide, will likely generate significant hostility from the majority Hutu, who make up 85 percent of Rwandans. It could be interpreted as a signal of a return to earlier historical trends in which the minority Tutsi-dominated Rwandan leadership and society before the tables turned in the Belgian-inspired Hutu "revolution" of 1959.

Kagame's critics have noted that his official policy of "banishment" of ethnic identification in Rwanda is really just a smokescreen for the dominance of Tutsi who comprise the leader's core inner circle, although there are high-ranking Hutu, such as prime minister Anastase Murekezi, in Kagame's government. Thus, the "us versus them" conundrum, aided in this case by the imperative of ethnic survival and shrouded in accusations

of a repressive political climate and poor human rights record, remains embedded in a larger worldview of transformation that has marked Rwanda's post-genocide journey.

### *Botswana*

Botswana's success as a "developmental state" is due to the country successfully avoiding the leadership deficit that has afflicted many African countries. The Southern African country of 2.2 million people, the third poorest in the world when it became independent from British colonial rule in 1966, had achieved middle-income status in the 1990s and a per capita GDP of \$7,000 in 2015, all as a result of leadership effectiveness.

The country's story is one of an unbroken chain of solid leadership involving four men—Sir Seretse Khama, the country's founding father; Quett Masire; Festus Mogae, the Mo Ibrahim Leadership Laureate; and Ian Khama, the current president and a son of Sir Seretse. Each, apart from Seretse, had served as vice-president to his predecessor, which is indicative of a conscious effort at ensuring leadership stability and orderly succession.

Three characteristics of this group helped shape the country's leadership.<sup>12</sup> First, the Botswana elite are mainly Tswana, giving them a common language and cultural background. Second, they were educated in the same schools inside Botswana, in neighboring countries such as South Africa, and further afield in the United Kingdom. Third, this shared "schoolmate" culture exposed them to similar and wider global experiences.

Of particular importance was the leadership tone set by Sir Seretse, a British-trained barrister who overcame much tribulation at the hands of British colonialists to build a modern nation on a futuristic vision. Other success factors included the absence of a dominant ethnic group in the country; fragile economic viability at independence, which formed a rallying point for the emergence of national leadership; and the absence of a strong class divide between the elite and the ordinary people, united as they were by a common engagement in livestock agriculture.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond these mainly historical factors, the more contemporary ones of the development of a strong democratic culture and institutions, the discovery and—rare for an African state—ultimately successful management of diamond and its bountiful revenues, a strong focus by Botswanan political leaders on public policy and management, and the stability of political succession, all played important roles in the Botswanan success story.

By Sir Seretse's death in 1980, Botswana was already well on its way to economic success. Ian Khama, the current president, has been largely successful

at diversifying the economy into value-adding industries around diamonds, such as diamond polishing instead of an unhealthy reliance on exports of raw diamonds that are more susceptible to exogenous market shocks.

### *Nigeria*

In his book *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Chinua Achebe, the globally acclaimed Nigerian author, concluded that, “the trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely the failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or anything else.” Achebe wrote these words in 1984 when Nigeria had been independent for nearly a quarter-century. Today, three decades later, Achebe’s words still ring true with beguiling simplicity but with profound implications for Africa’s most populous country of 180 million people.

With rare exceptions, leadership in Nigeria—which can be found in abundance in the private sector—has in the public sphere of politics and governance been marked by ethno-religious chauvinism (us versus them), a culture of megalomania (authority versus service) amongst political leaders, massive corruption, and the enthronement of mediocrity by favoring personal or ethnic/religious loyalty over competence (loyalty versus competence). Narrow political considerations have progressively and consistently trumped rational economic thinking and policy in governance.

The results have been predictable: fifty-seven years after its independence in 1960, when Nigeria was seen as a possible competitor to Japan and was at similar or higher levels of development with South Korea, Malaysia, and Thailand, Nigeria today is stuck in a rut, still with massive economic potential, but with a GDP per capita of \$3,000. This stands in contrast to the aforementioned countries above with GDPs per capita of \$26,000 (South Korea), \$10,500 (Malaysia), and \$5,775 (Thailand).

What has prevented Nigeria’s economic transformation is the leadership failure of extreme dependence on the export of crude oil, which today accounts for 90 percent of foreign exchange earnings. Despite much rhetoric over the past 40 years, Nigeria has remained unable to diversify its economy into a productive industrial one, although it has a rising services sector that now makes up just over 50 percent of total GDP. This has left Nigeria at the mercy of a volatile cycle of oil booms—which has only created fiscal indiscipline and a social culture of easy money—and debilitating busts. This economic failure in the midst of such potential, together with the combination of massive corruption with the absence of national

cohesion as a result of ethnic irredentism, is the real tragedy of Nigeria's leadership failure.

Although some governments in Nigeria's contemporary historical past had the benefit of having within their governance hierarchy competent technocrats, Nigeria's experience with leadership and economic and political failures demonstrate that the leadership competence and vision of the political heads of the national and sub-national governments are what matters most. No amount of subordinate technocratic competence can run faster than the abilities or limitations of the ultimate political leadership. The economic reforms and achievements in GDP growth witnessed during the presidency of Olusegun Obasanjo from 1999 to 2007 were due to a combination of technocratic competence with a political leadership with a clear economic vision.

Nigeria's leadership challenge is a product of the country's history. The trajectory of leadership selection took a negative turn with the excursion of the country's military officers into governance through a series of military coups, the first of which occurred in 1966, six years after independence, and eventually snowballed into a destructive civil war from 1967 – 1970. That war was successfully fought to prevent the secession of the country's eastern region (the short-lived Republic of Biafra). The Nigerian civil war also shaped the evolution of political leadership at the national level ever since because it tilted political power away from leadership ability and toward subjective factors such as ethnic identity as a springboard for the quest for both military and civilian democratic power in the decades since the war. Southeastern Nigeria and its highly educated and economically industrious Igbo ethnic group, which comprised the core of the Biafra rebellion, have been effectively excluded from political leadership in Nigeria ever since the civil war.

Decades of military rule, brought about by debilitating cycles of coups d'état, briefly attenuated at first by an interregnum of democratic rule between 1979 and 1983, in retrospect achieved essentially nothing other than thwarting a democratic development trajectory that could by now have achieved maturity. Democratic governance was restored in 1999 and has continued, unbroken, to date. In 2015, Nigerians elected Muhammadu Buhari, a former military dictator who came to power in a coup in December 1983 and was himself overthrown as president 20 months later in August 1985 by Gen. Ibrahim Babangida. Buhari's election was historic because he defeated an incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, who graciously conceded defeat rather than risk a potentially bloody showdown had he tried to cling to power.

Two years into Buhari's tenure, and with national elections looming in 2019, fundamental challenges of leadership still confront Nigeria, latterly compounded by the president's ill health. There has been widespread dissatisfaction with the slow pace of governance by Buhari, who took six months to appoint his cabinet and lost valuable time. Criticisms of a preponderance of his fellow Hausa-Fulani ethnic group and Muslim co-religionists in his appointments (the "us v them" conundrum) led to weakened trust across the ethnic and religious divides in the country.

The questionable economic management skills of his government, combined with the venal depletion of the country's foreign currency savings fund by federal and state governments during the prior Jonathan presidency, played a considerable role in plunging Nigeria into its worst recession in 25 years. Mr. Buhari has fought corruption with gusto, elected as he was largely on perceptions of his incorruptibility, but with mixed success born of the absence of a sophisticated approach that is deliberate, systemic, and holistic rather than moralistic, episodic, and theatrical—and, with the rare exception<sup>14</sup>, targeted mainly at opposition party politicians. There is a gap in real communication—the type practiced by Rwanda's Kagame—between the government and the people it governs.

The fixation of Nigeria's political leadership class with the "us versus them" syndrome has meant that basic reforms necessary for effective economic planning and management, such as a credible census and a national identification scheme, have not been executed because political leaders view these exercises through the prism of narrow, vested sectarian interests. There is no communication of a unifying national vision to counteract these fissiparous tendencies.

Nigeria clearly needs a new generation of leadership away from the products of a bygone historical era to one better equipped to confront the country's contemporary economic and political challenges of inclusive economic growth and national cohesion that is fraying at the seams. That leadership must be one that approaches the future with a clear worldview of the country's place in the world and how to get there, the economic knowledge, competence, and experience to turn Nigeria's undoubted potential into the reality of an economic powerhouse. That leadership must be one with the political will to tackle necessary constitutional and economic reforms required to take the country from the impoverishment and instability of oil boom-bust cycles to real prosperity based on a strategy of economic complexity and true fiscal federalism.<sup>15</sup> The writer Achebe was right: Nigeria needs to break its leadership jinx if it is to make real progress.

*South Africa*

As Africa's most advanced economy and a member of the BRICS group of emerging market countries, South Africa faces a crisis of leadership that demonstrates exactly how weak leadership negatively impacts the continent's progress. Between 1994, when Nelson Mandela was elected South Africa's first post-Apartheid president and served not just as South Africa's leader, but as a world leader in his own right, to the cerebral Thabo Mbeki, and to the earthy, populist Jacob Zuma, South Africa now faces an existential leadership question.

Mandela was the gold standard of leadership, a role model for a world universally inspired by his heroic struggle for the freedom of South Africa's non-white majority from racial oppression. Mandela was endowed with a rare level of vision and translated this quality, as president of the "new South Africa" into a rallying cry for reconciliation and unity instead of vengeance in a nation torn by Apartheid and its bitter legacy. His leadership task was to build the political and moral foundation of a country newly liberated from the dark force of constitutionally sanctioned repression of the majority of its citizens by a privileged minority. Despite the challenges of poverty and wild—but understandable—expectations of the black majority in a country the economy of which was built on the back of black labor for the benefit of the white population, he largely succeeded. He declined to seek an otherwise assured second term in office as president, and handed over to his vice-president, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) diplomat and intellectual Thabo Mbeki.

Mbeki provided continental leadership in Africa and championed the idea of the Africa Renaissance, a worldview of regeneration and transformation. But he was viewed as aloof in the context of domestic politics, and somewhat disconnected from the grassroots party faithful of the ANC. Mbeki was to be ultimately outmaneuvered, dethroned, and replaced by Jacob Zuma, a Zulu in a political party dominated by Xhosa language speaking leaders like his predecessors Mandela and Mbeki.

Under Zuma's presidency since 2009, the retrogressive understandings and characteristics of leadership that have marked several African countries' governments have gained ascendancy, with important political and economic consequences<sup>16</sup>. The first weakness of Zuma's leadership was that he brought to the leadership of an industrialized African state a personalized leadership style that was based more on the traditional Zulu kingship culture than the requirements of a modern state. The style and the context in which it was deployed were severely mismatched. Zuma's colorful private life only added to this conundrum.



Second, high-level corruption thrived under Zuma. His presidency was de-legitimized by the scandals surrounding the illegal furnishing of his private residence with public funds, with the country's Constitutional Court ordering him to refund the state for illegal expenses of state funds on his private property.<sup>17</sup> Corrupt cronyism has marked his leadership, leading to official findings of "state capture" by the president's business associates such as the controversial Gupta family.<sup>18</sup> Third, and directly as a consequence of the first two hallmarks of the Zuma presidency, the South African president consistently sought to undermine the country's institutions. His presidency has been marked by running battles with the judiciary and the Public Protector, two institutions that, rare for an African country, have not been cowed into submission to the leader's will.

Unsurprisingly, these predilections led to tensions between Zuma and technocratic professionalism in his cabinet that asserted independence from his political machinations, culminating in his controversial firing of Pravin Gordhan, South Africa's respected Minister of Finance, in early 2017. As a result of President Zuma's leadership crisis, the ANC, which hitherto practically had a lock on the votes of South Africa's black majority, has progressively lost political support, losing heavily in the provincial elections of 2016.<sup>19</sup>

While Zuma has retained the core loyalty of some factions of the ANC, his sacking of Gordhan galvanized broad-based protests and calls for his resignation. Ratings agencies downgraded South Africa's sovereign debt to junk status, with negative implications for the country's economy. Whether South Africa will continue down the path of leadership retrogression and stasis, or return to superior standards of leadership will be determined by Zuma's succession, either at the end of his tenure in 2019 or a forced resignation before then should his opponents prevail. President Zuma has clearly sought to influence the outcome of his succession in a manner calculated to protect him in the future, out of office, from investigations and prosecutions of his numerous scandals while in office. The outcome will also influence the trajectory of South Africa's economy and the ANC.

#### **ADDRESSING AFRICA'S LEADERSHIP CHALLENGE**

It's not enough to lament Africa's leadership deficit. What should be done about it? Although leaders in Africa have traditionally been seen as having the responsibility to drive governance and transformation in every case, the failure, with a handful of exceptions, of the political leaders of

African countries to create transformational outcomes that take their citizens out of poverty by creating the wealth of nations invites a significant role reversal in which citizens begin to drive the leadership agenda.

There are three important steps to be taken in addressing the leadership problem, and we return to where we began—identifying the fact that most political leaders in African problems do not understand the real meaning of leadership and, where they might have a clue, are too self-serving because they have not been adequately made accountable for their failures. First, aspiring leaders in Africa must be *trained* and prepared to

*Africa's weak leadership culture will not change without an activist demand for accountability and leadership performance by citizens and civil society.*

..... become leaders in the public sphere. This is the quickest way to short-circuit the deep cultural problems that bedevil the leadership enterprise on the continent. Second, the electorate in African countries must be empowered with basic economic and political education. And third, Africa's weak leadership culture will not change without an activist demand for accountability and leadership performance by citizens and civil society, much like shareholders and "activist investors" today hold the feet of CEOs and boards of modern business corporations to the fire.

### ***Leadership Training***

Leadership training, to be effective, will require a focus on the right things, all with an eye on creating the ability to lead with transformational impact given the "distance" between African countries and parts of the developing world and emerging markets such as East Asia and Latin America. This means a focus on visioning and the discipline of execution, the formulation and effective execution of public policy. In doing so, the well-tested and developed lessons of leadership science utilized in the global private sector, such as the difference between leadership and management, will need to be adapted for public service. Not everyone can or will be a leader. Understanding what leadership gurus call the "seven transformations" or "action logics" of leadership—the opportunist, the diplomat, the expert, the achiever, the individualist, the strategist, and the (transformational) alchemist—is necessary, coupled with how to grow in progression through these logics, if leaders are to be assigned to or achieve roles well matched with their capabilities.<sup>20</sup>

Innovative entrepreneurs are now filling the niche of meeting the need for leadership training in Africa. Fred Swanicker has been an early pioneer, starting with his high school-level African Leadership Academy in South Africa, and the recent establishment of the African Leadership University, which, hardly surprising, has campuses in two countries, Rwanda and Mauritius. The Guardians of the Nations International (GOTNI) in Nigeria is also playing a similar role focusing on preparing leaders. These efforts will likely result in a future generation of leaders far better equipped than the career politicians whose claim to leadership rests largely on their longevity in public office or in loitering in the corridors of political power.

### *Economic and Political Education*

Low levels of education on economics and democratic political and governance processes inhibit citizens in African countries from assessing public policy effectively and holding political leaders accountable. This has resulted in low standards of governance, in particular in the area of macro-economic management. If citizens do not understand the issues of public policy fully—even if they will know, anecdotally, whether their quality of life is better or worse—they will not be able to ask the right questions and interrogate public policy effectively. Providing this kind of education to the mass of citizens should be the focused objective of think tanks and civil society organizations. Too many think tanks in Africa are focused on “high-end” academic or policy work that has little relevance to the realities of governance in the continent. Effective political education must also persuade voters on the dangers of vote-buying that is practiced in elections in several African countries.

### *Activism for Accountability*

Increased activism for democratic accountability by citizens and civil society is essential to improving the quality of leadership in Africa. This is already happening, but has yet to attain a critical mass that turns it into a powerful force. Here, Africa's leapfrogging adaptation of mobile technologies and social media is a ready vehicle for mass mobilization. In Nigeria, an incumbent Nigerian president, Goodluck Jonathan, was voted out of office in the 2015 presidential elections and conceded defeat in a remarkable gesture uncharacteristic of many African leaders.

Activism should also set clear leadership selection criteria for aspiring

political leaders in African countries. Such leadership selection criteria should focus on three factors by which candidates should be assessed: character, qualifications, and experience.

## CONCLUSION

Decades of democracy in many African countries have yet to yield good leadership in most of the continent. This is an indication that, while the democratic process and voting freely to choose leaders serve as an expression of democratic rights, what matters more is the outcome of these processes in terms of the quality of leadership that democracy produces. This is why the focus in African countries must now shift far more to the questions of leadership selection, education, activism, and accountability than continue to dwell on the ritual of elections and voting that have produced largely sub-optimal outcomes in the context of traditional leadership.

As the Mauritian President Aameena Gurib-Fakim has so pithily put it: "But the onus is also on all Africans. People have to start asking the right

.....

*The oppressive and  
exploitative status quo of  
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.....

questions. Politicians, leaders, policy-makers in normal democracies are all accountable to the people. But, and I am sorry for saying this brutally, we get the government we deserve. The one we vote in. It's your vote."<sup>21</sup>

If the wave of populism sweeping the Western world is to serve as any lesson to Africans, it makes the point that democratic outcomes matter, for better or worse, and that the yoke of the oppressive and exploitative status quo of incompetent and corrupt political leadership that is still too prevalent in many African countries is not necessarily destiny. They can be overthrown, peacefully and legitimately, through the ballot box. *f*

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