

Introduction

Civil Society, Leadership and the Democratic Process in Africa: What Prospects?

This is the first of a series of comparative studies that DPMF has sponsored on the theme “Leadership, Civil Society and Democratisation in Africa”. This study is on four East African countries while the second study, which has also been completed and published, is on six Southern African countries. And the third study is planned to be on six West African countries. The aim of these studies is to find out: what role can Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play in Africa given the new democratic dispensation? Are there any common characteristics emerging in the three different regions regarding the relationship between leadership, civil society and democratisation?

This study of four East African countries is based on the assumption that under the emerging democratic dispensation: (a) some CSOs are, in general, playing a positive role particularly with regard to pressurising governments to open more space for democratic governance, and (b) they could be a useful arena for producing capable and democratic leaders who could strengthen the ranks of policy makers and political leaders. We certainly do not assume that CSOs will produce better leaders than political parties or other institutions (e.g., the private sector, trade unions or the military). We do not consider them as alternative fora whose function is to exclude and bypass political parties from producing political leaders. We view CSOs simply as an additional arena for pushing the process of democratisation forward and as having the potential of producing new leaders.

While the theme of the study covers three distinct concepts – leadership, civil society and democracy – the researchers have tended to focus on two areas, namely, the CSOs’ leadership (whether they operate democratically, particularly with regard to their succession) and the extent to which CSOs are contributing to the democratisation process.

Civil Society and the Range of CSOs

Some of the authors in this volume touch on the history of CSOs in their respective countries – Chechaga on Tanzania, Sachikonye on Zimbabwe and Adhiambo-Oduol, very briefly, on Kenya. It is well known that CSOs played an important role during the nationalist struggle against colonialism. It is also a well-known fact that after independence, most if not all CSOs were co-opted by the state and, under one-party rule, became part of the governmental system. Trade unions, professional associations, women and youth organisations, etc., all came under the control of the ruling party or directly under the government. Most governments did not allow any kind of independent advocacy or developmental groups or CSOs. Hence, most of the CSOs in the countries studied came into being after the multi-party system started to operate in the countries. Thus the history of most CSOs in these countries is very short. And yet they flourished in large numbers. In Uganda for example, between 1986 and April 2001, an incredible number of CSOs/NGOs were established – a total of 4200. This is at the rate of 280 a year! And the story is roughly similar – though the exact numbers may vary – in all the countries. Hence, this phenomenal growth of CSOs is an important pointer at the nature of state-society relation in these countries. And since most of these recent CSOs are largely funded by external donors, it is also an indication of the extensive role foreign donors play in their attempt to influence or shape civil society. Needless to say, this role has significant political implications.

This high-speed growth of CSOs also has other serious implications. Firstly, CSOs have become an important big industry in these countries. They are an industry in terms of employing a substantial section of the urban middle class, but they are also an industry in terms of creating an important space

for discourse and activities. Secondly, given the rapidity in which CSOs are established, they are obviously too recent, as institutions, to build up capacity to manage themselves properly and professionally. More importantly, the time span is too short for these CSOs to become forums for training a new breed of capable and democratic leadership. In any case only a very few of these CSOs operate in the area of advocacy for democracy. Thirdly, given the limited time that these CSOs have been in existence, they are unlikely to have achieved much of their objectives and missions. Fourthly, most of the significant CSOs are urban-based and are run by members of the educated middle class. Finally, there are many important differences amongst the CSOs. These include:

- (a) their location: the politically important and large CSOs are almost all based in the urban centres – the capital in most cases, while the many small and developmental CSOs are based and operate in rural areas;
- (b) their history: some are old, but most are new;
- (c) their size: some have mass support, some are large umbrella organisations while most are small;
- (d) their mission: some defend the political rights and economic interests of their members, others advocate for respect of human rights, while most are simply development oriented;
- (e) their organisational structures and achievements, and
- (f) their relations with the state: some cooperate with the state, others are completely co-opted, while still others have hostile and confrontational relations with the state.

In Kenya, for example, (and this is replicated in most other countries), CSOs have been described in the following terms:

Kenya has a varied and dense network of voluntary and civic associations. Urban civil society appears to be quantitatively different from that found in rural areas. Rural associations are oriented essentially towards improving the material quality of life; a large proportion of rural voluntary organisations are credit unions, cooperatives and labour pools. Student and professional groups are concentrated in urban civil society and played a major role in pressing the government to reinstate multi-party politics in the period 1990-92 and to accede to at least minimal constitutional reforms prior to the operatives 1997 General Elections. (Jamhuri ya Kenya of June 2000).

The researchers in the four countries selected some interesting and useful examples of CSOs to study. The CSOs selected for study are:

Uganda: 3 CSOs –

- (i) Action for Development (ACFORDE): established in 1985, it is a nationwide women organisation, with considerable following;
- (ii) Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda (NUDIPU): an umbrella organization with massive following of 17 organizations of different categories and which has reached out to 200,000 persons; it was established in 1987;
- (iii) Foundation for Human Rights Initiative (FHRI): an elitist organization with a few highly place members (MPs, Judges, etc.) mainly from the Baganda tribe; it was established in 1986.

Kenya: 5 CSOs –

- (i) Kenya Women's Political Caucus (KWPC): it is the main focus of the study and was established in 1997. It is an umbrella organisation with a membership of 65 women organisations and a large number of individual members – parliamentarians, professionals and gender activists.

Other CSOs looked at in Kenya are:

- (ii) The National Council of Churches of Kenya: an old well-established umbrella organisation of largely Protestant Churches (NCCCK);
- (iii) The National Convention Executive Council (NCEC): established in 1997 as a mass movement of many different groups such as parliamentarians, various cadres of professionals, students, academics, NGOs and the clergy. Its aim is to achieve comprehensive constitutional and legal reforms;
- (iv) The Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC): established in 1990, its mandate is to monitor, document and publicise human rights violations in Kenya;
- (v) Maendeleo ya Wanawake Organisation (MYWO): established in 1952 during the colonial period, it is a grassroots organisation with 600,000 members and branches all over the country. Its mission is to contribute to the improvement of the economic, social and political status of women in Kenya.

Tanzania: 2 CSOs –

- (i) The Tanzania Gender Network Programme (TGNP): established in 1993, it is a national network of 200 women NGOs in 25 districts in the country; its objectives is to facilitate the process of gender equality, social equality, women's empowerment and social transformation at all levels;
- (ii) The Association of Journalists and Media Workers (AJM): established in 1994 with 720 members (journalists, 30% of whom are women); it has branches in all the major towns of Tanzania; its mission is to fight for press freedom and freedom of information, for training and capacity building of journalists and media workers and for defending their interest;

Zimbabwe: 2 CSOs –

- (i) The Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU): established in 1981 under the patronage of the ruling party and the government; however, since the 1990s it has played a leading role in opposition to the government and been campaigning for democracy; its social base is the working class – the core members of the Congress are members of the various labour unions which are affiliated to it;
- (ii) The National Constitutional Assembly (NCA): founded in 1997, it is an umbrella organisation, and decidedly of "middle class origin"; it was formed by young, progressive intellectuals working in church-affiliated organisations, professional associations, universities, women's organisations and the NGO sector; it is a single-issue organisation concentrating on constitutional reform.

The selection of these CSOs was not based on a random sample, but on the researchers' deeper knowledge of the kind of CSOs which are likely to provide useful information on the two critical issues – namely, their role in the democratisation process and the kind of leadership which is emerging from such important CSOs. This method of selection may not satisfy those promoters of the random sample method, but in our view, the researchers have selected the right kinds of CSOs for the purpose of this research project.

As stated earlier, the researchers did not give sufficient attention to the nature of civil society in these four countries nor have they discussed it. But clearly this is an important issue which we must mention at least in passing. Civil societies in the four countries differ significantly. From the 1980s onwards, they experienced a significant rise in CSOs. In Uganda, civil society had emerged from an internal conflict indistinguishable from civil war and was therefore deeply affected by the civil war. Indeed, the conflict has continued in northern Uganda to the present day. In Zimbabwe, civil society came out of a long and bitter struggle against white minority settler rule. While political power was won by the nationalists, but economic power remained with the white minority especially in agriculture. In Tanzania, civil society emerged from more than twenty years of tight one-party rule during which the economy was nationalised and socialised, with the peasant being subjected to the bureaucratic planning of their village economies and welfare, while the growth of an economic middle class was arrested. Instead, a bureaucratic middle class emerged – based in Government and the large public sector. In Kenya, on the other hand, civil society also came out of a tight one-party rule, but a rule which practiced unbridled open market economy and during which state institutions were used for purposes of large-scale capital accumulation in favour of specific ethnic groups. Consequently, in Kenya, there emerged a large middle class schooled in the devious ways of getting rich quickly by manipulating the state system and the private sector. Thus the older CSOs emerged from these different civil societies, while almost all the new ones came into being after the opening up of the multi-party system. One important feature that needs to be noted is that, in all the four countries, religious organisations – both Christian and Muslims – played an important role as CSOs before and after the opening up. Some of these issues relating to the nature of civil society have been discussed in some details by Chechaga and in passing by Adhiambo-Oduol and Sachikonye. But the nature, history and role of African civil society have yet to be fully studied. The role it has played in the past and during the last two decades indicates inherent strength rather than weakness as some researchers and donors tend to argue. A full study of African civil society is therefore urgently needed.

The researchers in this project focussed on two issues – the role of the CSOs in pushing for democratisation, and on the question of their leadership. We now turn to the findings of the researchers with regards to these two questions, namely, (i) to what extent CSOs are contributing to the wider democratisation process and the institutionalisation of democratic governance; and (ii) whether the CSOs sector is emerging as a useful forum for producing capable and democratic leaders.

(i) *The Role of CSOs in the Democratisation Process*

Sachikonye raises an important point, namely, that CSOs which advocate that governments practice democracy, must themselves first pass this test of practicing democracy. However, almost all the CSOs studied have had problems with practicing democracy, in their operations and in the way their leaders emerge particularly during succession. Yet, some of the CSOs, despite their internal problems and lack of democracy, have been modestly successful in pushing governments to open up democratic space and to respect human rights and gender equality. The most difficult issue with regards to making governments more democratic has been the issue of constitutional reform. This is an issue in which the governments – Kenya and Zimbabwe in particular – have been most obdurate and adamantly against reforming their constitutions. Skilful and united leadership as well as massive mobilisation of CSOs were essential in this process. At the same time, governments needed to be brought round to join the CSOs and to build a consensus in the process and later in the content of constitutional reform. It took a long time for the Kenyans to reach such a consensus while the Zimbabweans did not succeed in getting to the point of consensus with the government on the process of constitutional reform.

CSOs have shown considerable tenacity in pushing the governments to open democratic space – especially on issues of gender equality and respect for human rights. On some of these issues, the so-

called “international community” has supported the campaigns of local CSOs. The support is largely from Western countries through their various channels and leverages and also the UN System.

The researchers have raised several important matters which cut across all types of CSOs and apply to the majority of them. We list these below without any order of importance:

- (a) many CSO officials and leaders lack the skills and capacity to administer and manage their organisations;
- (b) there are many CSOs which have very narrow social base or constituency – some are simply tribally based; this is in contrast to some which have wide and national membership/constituency;
- (c) most CSOs are faced with serious problems of financial mismanagement;
- (d) many CSOs do not practice democratic governance; they generally have undemocratic power struggles for leadership, particularly during succession;
- (e) many CSOs have agendas and priorities which do not reflect the needs of their constituencies;
- (f) most are totally dependent on external donor funding, which raises questions about their sustainability, and the impact of donors on the CSOs’ agenda and leadership;
- (g) relationship with governments vary from cooperation, cooption, to confrontation and hostility.

These are serious weaknesses which reflect the nature of the particular sector of civil societies from which the CSOs have emerged, despite the differences in the histories and experiences of the four countries. These weaknesses also reflect the environment within which these CSOs have been operating such as the short period during which the CSOs have been operating, the very rapid and massive growth rate of CSOs, the inexperience of the middle class in running these types of voluntary organisations, the absence of a culture of accountability and transparency in the middle class section of civil societies, the role of the donor community and the suspicious attitude of the governments towards CSOs and whose gut reaction is either to co-opt the CSOs or to oppose them.

The researches have made several suggestions to ameliorate this situation.

Firstly, there is a need in all these countries for a clear policy framework on a partnership between the governments and CSOs. Needless to say, this relationship is key to democratic governance.

Secondly, both governments and advocacy CSOs should stop adopting hostile and confrontational attitudes towards each other. They should try to work out a consensus on the process for democratic change within a clear government policy framework towards CSOs.

Thirdly, there is a serious need for capacity building of CSO operatives and leaders in effective accountable management and in democratic practices, especially with regard to the procedures of electing leaders and in their succession.

But despite these weaknesses, some of the CSOs have been very successful in opening up space for democratic governance in their respective countries. Indeed, these few CSOs make up for the large number of CSOs that have failed, for various reasons, to contribute towards the democratisation process. However, it is only fair to point out that a vast number of small, rural based CSOs are simply concerned with development projects and improving the material well-being of their respective constituencies rather than in opening up democratic space.

To conclude on this issue, the potential of CSOs in enhancing democratic governance in these and other countries is real, positive and considerable. This potential is being actualised as time passes and especially if governments adopt a clear policy framework and the CSOs adopt a consensual approach, practice democracy, and undertake capacity building.

This brings us to the second issue of whether these CSOs – whatever their mission – are emerging as possible forum for producing capable and democratic leaders who could then strengthen the various sectors in need of such capable leaders – political, administrative, private sector and professional associations.

(ii) *CSOs and Democratic Leadership*

Behind the widespread support being given to the CSOs by external donors, there is an assumption that these CSOs will produce a new, better, more credible and democratic generation of leaders who will replace existing political leaders. This is because there is a serious concern amongst the donors (and some Africans) on the poor quality and performance of the present generation of most African *political leaders*.

But the question of the quality and performance of African leadership is complex because it has been politicised. The discourse on leadership in academia, amongst the international community and in the media focuses almost entirely on *political leadership*. In our view, however, the issue of leadership should not be confined to *political leaders*. All kinds of leaders are needed, at all levels and in various sectors and institutions of society – in politics, administration and the public sector, educational and professional institutions, the private sector and the military, etc. However, it is important to point out that there is a substantive cadre of capable leaders at all levels in all these areas. But these present leaders in the wider sectors of society are: (a) caught up in the crises due to structural causes and lack of effective strategies and policies, (b) not fully and effectively utilized, and (c) need expansion and upgrading through appropriate, relevant and selective capacity building.

A closer look at the issue of leadership in general – leaders in all sectors of society – indicates that there are good and bad leaders across the board. Different sections of society have their own institutions of training leaders. The more recent CSOs, as we have seen, have no such institution for training leaders and so far have produced largely mediocre leaders. Some trade unions in some countries have training institutes for mid and lower level cadres. The civil service has major national training institutes. And so do the private sector and the military. However, it appears that these training institutes are inadequate and need large-scale upgrading. Indeed, the major effort by the World Bank to reform African civil services has yet to show serious improvements in the civil service in the countries which carried out World Bank Civil Service Reforms. Altogether there is thus a serious need for capacity building across the board, but it should be relevant, focussed and related to the needs of the countries. This is needed particularly with regard to CSOs. Intrinsic to capacity building should be critical themes on democratic governance, preparation for the future and other key and strategic issues. This effort of upgrading leadership quality and expanding the number of capable and efficient leaders is likely to bring about improvement in the management of development and the country as a whole. It will be an important contribution to the wider process of solving the larger economic and political crises. This larger crises needs major structural transformation of the economy, the political system and African countries' position in the global system. Capable, democratic and visionary political leaders are an essential and critical element in the process of bringing about this larger structural transformation. Such leaders tend to emerge from society rather than from formal training instructions. We expect that in the near future, some such leaders may emerge even from CSOs.

The present discourse, which focuses exclusively on political leaders, is far from helpful. A brief look at this discourse may be instructive.

How valid is the argument and assertion that African political leaders as individuals are responsible for the African crises because they do not have the necessary “leadership quality”? We do not agree with this argument and assertion. For the logic of this assertion is that there is a simple solution to the “African Crises”, namely, capacity building as presented by the donor community. Train new leaders and the African crises will disappear! Capacity building and the training of leaders is needed everywhere – including in the two main multilateral institutions – the WB and the IMF. But capacity building and training is not a panacea for the deep-rooted economic problems, political conflicts, social and cultural dislocation of the African people. The improvement of the African condition and the resolution of the African “crises”, requires major structural transformation of the internal and external factors which are the root cause of the crises. New and more capable political leaders, even if highly trained (how are political leaders trained?) is only a small element in the complex process of resolving the African crises.

There are two broadly representative views on the question of political leadership in Africa.

The first view is that individual political leaders have caused the crises in their respective countries. This view is forcefully expressed by the Chairman of the ALF (the Africa Leadership Forum). He states “...the struggle of most African nations in the throes of hunger, disease and war continue... to effect a meaningful cure, a proper diagnosis of the primary cause of the ailment is pertinent...we at the ALF, through informed research have situated the seeming inability of Africa to properly harness its resources to the insipid air of lethargy that has dogged its leaders for several decades now.” “Apparently the rashes of violence that streak across the continent... are traceable to the orgy of leadership crises that has become synonymous with the continent.” “It is an empirical fact that African leaders, nay rulers, north, east, central, south and west have failed to live up to the expectations of their people.” “The beleaguered and oppressed masses thus became the victims of the scapegoat of history and power. They became recipient of the socio-economic and political harshness unleashed upon them by first, the colonialist and, now, their black leaders – a situation that left them despondent. Is Africa cursed with bad leaders? Are Africa’s woes insurmountable?”

And according to the Chairman of ALF, Africa has a solution to surmount its woes. The challenges presented by globalisation require “a system of training and deliberate preparation of potential leaders, if Africa must truly break with its sordid past”. “To this end, the Forum (ALF) organises and supports programmes for the training of young and promising Africans with leadership potentials so as to expose them to the demands, duties and obligations of leadership positions and to prepare them systematically for assuming higher responsibilities and meeting the challenges of an increasingly inter-dependent world”.¹

Other solutions have been proposed – such as paying off political leaders to leave office, or provide a “golden handshake to military officers” or even the recolonisation of some African countries. We need not discuss these solutions to Africa’s problems presumed to have been caused by their incapable leaders.

The second view of leadership is essentially based on a Fanonian perspective. This view looks at the ruling elite rather than individual leaders and argues that a ruling elite reflects the nature and interest of the class from which it comes. In the case of the African ruling elite they are part of the African middle class which is described graphically by Fanon as “ a sort of little greedy caste, avid and

¹ Machungo, Mario Da Graca. 2001 This earth, my brother. *Africa Forum* 5, nos. 1&2 (August):4-7.

voracious, with a mind of a huckster, only too glad to accept the dividends that former colonial powers (or those who drive globalisation) hand out. This get-rich quick middle class shows itself incapable of great ideas or of inventiveness". (The Wretched of the Earth 1961). Thus the present ruling elite which comes from this class, are essentially "predator elite". They fight for the spoils of power rather than for national interest.

According to Tunde Obadina², "The ruling elite have benefited enormously from the economic misfortune of their nations. Not surprising, they prefer to maintain the status quo as chaotic and depressive as it may seem for the majority of African and liberal observers. There is reason in anarchy". He further argues that African leaders are not ignorant or buffoons as the media tends to paint them. In Nigeria, for example, "They and their advisors have shown themselves to be adept in the art of retaining power.... Nigeria's ruling generals and their advisors have shown great political sophistication." Furthermore, existing economic policies are being pursued not from lack of knowledge of economic theory and management but rather to serve the interests of those in power. And one might add, because of pressure from the World Bank and the IMF.

Both these views of African political leaders are problematic. Africa has produced powerful, capable and visionary leaders – as individuals without any training and also from the same greedy middle class. Individuals such as Nkrumah, Nasser, Sekou Toure, Ben Bella, Nyerere, Mandela, to name only a few. Although one can, without difficulties, ignore the view that individual leaders have caused Africa's problems, it is more difficult to ignore the second view of a "predator elite" and their class interest. But this view does not automatically exclude the emergence of one or two capable and visionary leaders (from the present middle class) although their effectiveness is likely to be negated by the "predator elite" who will most likely dominate strategic positions in government, political parties, CSOs, the military, etc. Such leaders may have a small possibility of achieving major restructuring of society if they effectively control or destroy the Fanonian middle class from which they come. But as Cabral has pointed out, "Class Suicide" is a rare and very difficult undertaking.

This research project has shown that, within the brief period that most of the CSOs have been in existence, they have not, and to be realistic, could not, produce outstanding and visionary leaders to lead their countries. However, in the long run, CSOs will be capable of producing such leaders. But whatever leaders are produced by CSOs, they will simply compliment others emerging from other sectors of society – political parties, trade unions, the private sector, the military, etc. And as we have pointed out earlier, good and capable leaders are not a panacea to Africa's economic and political crises. They are one, albeit an important element, in a larger process.

Can African civil society under the democratic dispensation produce more capable and democratic leaders? In our view, and in the long run, the answer is a definite yes. Indeed, we believe that political parties, trade unions, professional associations, the private sector, the military – all these sectors of society are producing, have produced in the past and can produce in the future, capable and democratic leaders – political as well as leaders who can do well in other sectors of society. The critical question is whether these leaders can solve Africa's problems without major structural transformation within each country and major changes in the position of African countries within the global system. The answer, as we have argued above, is sadly in the negative.

² Obadina, Tunde. Africa's Crises of Governance. <http://www.Sons of Africa>.