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Africa's Dilemma:
European Borders, Contested Rule

BY MARK N. KATZ

Africa has recently seen movement toward democratization. Whether out of the growing conviction that it is preferable, or the sense that political change is inevitable, several one-party or dictatorial regimes now permit a free press, opposition parties, and more or less "free" elections. Indeed, contested elections are becoming an increasingly common feature of political life in Africa. Of course, there are countries where progress toward democracy seemed to have begun but was halted when the ruling elites saw that this would lead to their removal. But these regimes are no longer so self-confident; they are very much on the defensive and appear to be weakening.

The demise of authoritarian regimes does not necessarily mean that democracy will flourish in Africa; authoritarian regimes have not been the only obstacle to democracy. The "legacy of empire"—that all the borders between African states were drawn by outside powers without reference to preexisting national, ethnic, or other boundaries—may become the most serious obstacle to the establishment and maintenance of democracy in Africa. Democratization often brings forward demands for secession or a realignment of existing patterns of ethnic relations. As a result, democratization efforts may not proceed smoothly and peacefully, and may involve internal conflict and demands for the alteration of the colonial-era borders recognized and maintained by the member countries of the Organization of African Unity (OAU).

COLONY-CARVING

Africa's current borders were essentially established by the European colonial powers at the 1885 Berlin Conference. Borders between European colonial em-

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pires typically reflected European power relations, while those within these empires usually reflected interest group politics in the home country or administrative convenience; they did not recognize African divisions and rivalries. Consequently, as African states became independent, many found that the inherited borders divided ethnic groups between two or more countries and enclosed diverse ethnic groups that, at best, had little experience of cooperation with each other and, at worst, had a history of strife.

Recognizing that the inherited borders were a problem, and fearing endless conflict over them, the charter members of the OAU decided that European-drawn borders must not be challenged. This decision was unanimously approved by the OAU and has been maintained, with two exceptions: Somalia, which claims territory inhabited by Somalis in Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya; and Morocco, which claims Western (former Spanish) Sahara. Surprisingly, the independent African governments have been even more committed to maintaining the European borders in Africa than the Europeans were. The colonial powers had felt no compunction about altering them, but except for a handful of attempts (which were mainly condemned by other African governments), independent African states have made few border changes.

As a result, Africa has been remarkably free of interstate armed conflict over territorial issues. While there have been a few such conflicts, except for the 1977-1978 Somali-Ethiopian war, the ongoing conflict between Morocco and the Sahrawi liberation movement (POLISARO) in Western Sahara, and the off-again on-again war between Libya and Chad (1973-1988), most have not been long or bloody. However, there has been substantial intrastate conflict on the continent—which the OAU has largely failed to prevent or resolve. Secession attempts, dictatorial minority rule, and power struggles have riddled postindependence Africa.

Secession attempts are sometimes made by minority groups that form a majority in a particular region, groups who feel (often with ample cause) persecuted by the majority and unable to adequately protect their rights in the existing state. The dominant majority in the country as a whole usually opposes this desire for secession, not wishing to lose any part of its territory.

One of the greatest secession struggles occurred in Nigeria, where the Ibos, a regionally dominant minority, attempted to secede from Nigeria in 1967 and establish the Republic of Biafra; by the end of the civil war in 1970, more than half a million Ibos died. In Ethiopia, the Eritreans fought a 39-year war of secession after they were forcibly federated with Ethiopia in 1952. The clans of northern Somalia seceded from Somalia in 1991 and formed their own independent state, Somaliland; the clans of southern Somalia have not recognized this secession, but have not acted forcefully to end it because of their preoccupation with internal quarrels. Other secessionist efforts have included those in Equatoria (Sudan), Cabinda (Angola), Casamance (Senegal), and, during the 1990s, Zululand (South Africa).

White minority rule was, of course, the norm in Africa during the colonial era. However, there have been several cases in which a black minority has held sway over a black majority from one or more other groups. The most well-known example of this occurred in Ethiopia, where the Amhara ruled over Tigreans, Oromos, Eritreans, and Western Somalis, among other groups. This pattern of Amhara dominance survived the downfall of Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 and continued under the Marxist leader Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. It only ended in mid-1991 when the Eritrean People's Liberation Front occupied Eritrea and the Tigrean People's Liberation Front came to dominate the rest of the country—establishing a new pattern of minority rule.

In other cases, minority rule over a majority developed or intensified after independence. The British and the French belatedly attempted to introduce Western-style, multiparty democracy in most of their colonies as they were withdrawing. These pseudodemocracies, however, did not survive long in most African countries, where they were replaced by either one-party or military regimes. Although these regimes claimed to represent the entire nation, the president or leader usually gave key positions to the people he trusted most—his own ethnic group. As a result, the government and the army became increasingly dominated by this particular group; examples include the Marehan clan in Somalia under Major General Siad Barre and the Kalenjin in Kenya under Daniel arap Moi.

Many of the coups in Africa represent not just the replacement of one leader by another, but the displacement of the dominant ethnic or tribal group by another. Increasingly, however, the question of ethnic dominance has led to extended civil conflict. The ethnic groups involved do not dispute the legitimacy of the existing state, and may not appear to challenge the legacy of empire in the obvious way secessionists do. But the combined actions of the antagonists in these civil wars often do challenge this legacy by the fact that they occupy different parts of the country, thereby creating de facto states that are more ethnically homogenous than the de jure one. Examples of such conflict include the civil wars in Liberia, southern Somalia, and Angola.

Far from ameliorating ethnic conflict, the process of democratization has exacerbated ethnic tensions in several countries. For example, the unwillingness of Ovimbundu leader Jonas Savimbi to accept electoral defeat in Angola's 1992 presidential elections led to the renewal of civil war between Ovimbundus and other groups (mainly Mbundus and mestizoes) in Angola. The assassination of Burundi's first elected president—who came from the long-oppressed Hutu majority—in October 1993 led to renewed fighting between Tutsis and Hutus in that country. Last April, the suspicious death of Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, broke a fragile Hutu-Tutsi power-sharing agreement and renewed the government's civil war with the Rwandan Patriotic Front, in which the Tutsi minority regained control of the government. This is not an encouraging trend.

A NEW TWIST

Despite such turbulent times, the legacy of empire has remained remarkably durable. However, two important changes may now strengthen those challenging this legacy. The first is the end of the cold war; the second the growing demand for democracy in Africa.

During the cold war, a constellation of factors propped up the legacy of empire. United States foreign policymakers feared that change in African states with non-Marxist regimes would benefit the Soviet Union, particularly secession efforts (such as those mounted by the Biafrans and Eritreans) or efforts to replace minority rule by majority rule (as in South Africa). In the 1960s and 1970s several self-declared Marxist regimes came to power in Africa, and the United States used overt and covert means to counter them; but even in Marxist countries it would not support secessionists. For example, Washington gave significant military support to one anti-government group in Angola, Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (**UNITA**), but that group sought to replace the Marxist government, not create a new country. By contrast, no American support was provided to the secessionist movement in the Cabinda region of Angola.

During its heyday, the Soviet Union was a revolutionary power. It encouraged African governments to be pro-Soviet, and held out the Soviet model of develop-

ment as more appropriate for Africa than Western capitalism. Moscow also provided significant political support as well as more limited material assistance to movements fighting against holdout European colonial rulers (primarily Portuguese) and white minority rule in southern Africa. Where Marxist movements succeeded, the Soviet Union and its allies provided considerable security assistance, especially where these regimes faced insurgencies.

Moscow supported change in Africa, but change only within the existing pattern of states created by the legacy of empire. The Soviet Union generally did not support demands to alter borders or to secede; not surprisingly, Moscow did not want to see friendly regimes (whether Marxist or non-Marxist) grow unstable, fall from power, or reorient their foreign policies away from the Soviet Union. Indeed, Moscow not only indicated its opposition to many of these movements, but actually gave military assistance to governments (including non-Marxist ones) to suppress some of them. For example, Moscow gave the Nigerian government military support to end Biafra's independence bid. To weaken the anti-Soviet Selassie regime, Moscow initially supported Eritrean rebels seeking secession from Ethiopia, but switched to helping suppress this movement after the pro-Soviet Mengistu regime came to power in Addis Ababa in 1974.

Moscow was allied to one state—Somalia—that did not accept its existing borders but claimed territory in neighboring states. However, when Siad Barre tried to forcibly seize the Somali-inhabited Ogaden from Ethiopia in 1977, Moscow provided large-scale military assistance to the Marxist regime in Addis Ababa; Mogadishu then expelled all Soviet and Cuban advisers, and abrogated its treaty of friendship and cooperation with the Soviet Union.

An important reason why the United States and the Soviet Union did not support the breakup of African states was because of **OAU** opposition to the idea. This superpower solidarity with the **OAU** did not result strictly from a sense of idealism. Each feared that if it supported secession in one case, most or even all **OAU** members would register their disapproval by moving toward alliance with the other superpower.

The end of the cold war has dramatically changed this. With Moscow no longer engaged in a global competition for influence with Washington, Russia is mainly concerned with itself, its immediate neighbors,

and the West. Not only has Russia ceased to oppose challenges to the legacy of empire in Africa, but by recognizing the independence of the non-Russian republics that seceded from the Soviet Union, it has helped provide a successful example of secession for would-be secessionists.

The United States remains a superpower. But since Washington's primary interest in Africa during the cold war was to prevent the spread of Soviet influence, its interest in and concern about Africa has declined. While the United States does not necessarily support challenges to the legacy of empire in Africa, it does not have a strong incentive to oppose them either. Thus, while the dynamics of the cold war led the two superpowers to defend the legacy of empire in Africa, in the post-cold war era there are no strong forces outside Africa that want to uphold it.

Similarly, opinion within Africa supporting the legacy of empire has also weakened from the 1960s and 1970s to the present. This has occurred through an evolution of African intellectual and popular (though not always governmental) attitudes toward democratization.

When the majority of African nations first achieved their independence, most political as well as intellectual leaders viewed parliamentary democracy as a Western model alien to Africa. The slow pace of parliamentary democracy worked well in countries where economic development was advanced; but, they argued, the tremendous need for African states to lift themselves out of poverty and make rapid progress toward development required urgent, decisive action. Western-style democracy not only impeded swift action, but also emphasized societal divisions. African nations, already saddled with ethnic, tribal, and other divisions, could not afford to create more divisiveness. An African form of democracy was needed that fostered "unity." And, it was often argued, the needs of a country could best be determined by a single party encompassing all the nation's different groups, or by an omniscient "great leader." The ruling party or the great leader, it was asserted, could unify the nation while a multiparty system would "artificially" divide it.[']

With regard to ethnic relations within African states, the views of African political and intellectual leaders in the early postindependence period were strongly influenced by Marxism-Leninism. Just as Moscow's goal was to create a "new Soviet man" out of the disparate ethnic groups that made up the Soviet Union, so it was the goal of new African governments to mold a unifying national consciousness for the disparate ethnic groups thrown together in artificially drawn states. But just as Russians dominated the Soviet Union despite Soviet rhetoric about the equality of all ethnic groups inside the country, African nations frequently became dominated by their "great leader's" ethnic group.

'Kwame Nkrumah, the first postindependence leader of Ghana, expressed this viewpoint succincdy: "A people's parliamentary democracy with a one-party system is better able to express and satisfy the common aspirations of a nation as a whole, than a multiple-party parliamentary system, which is in fact only a ruse for perpetuating, and covers up, the inherent struggle between the "haves' and the 'have-nots.' " Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), pp. 100-101.

By the early 1990s, many in Africa had grown disillusioned with the early models of African independence. One-party, one-man rule had failed to bring about rapid economic development. For example, Ghana's charismatic Kwame Nkrumah promised modern industrialization and amenities; however, his efforts to bring these about resulted in economic failure. In addition, many of these regimes seemed more concerned with enriching themselves and their ethnic groups than their countries. Occasionally a vigorous leader did launch policies that benefited the entire country, but there was no mechanism for peacefully replacing these leaders as they aged and lost touch with the populace. Holding regular elections so that a country could periodically rid itself of a corrupt, incompetent, or simply unpopular leadership without resorting to force became increasingly appealing.

In addition, those ethnic groups excluded from power in various African states have become particularly disaffected with the often oppressive one-party, one-man regimes. Long gone are the initial postindependence beliefs in such regimes' promises to rule on behalf of all groups. Excluded groups have recently sought to end their oppression through democratization. This is especially true in cases where the oppressed group is the majority, or where there is a multiplicity of ethnic groups in which no single one forms a majority.

The present situation thus favors challenges to the legacy of empire to a far greater extent than was true during the cold war. Yet, while they may be unpopular and no longer receive external military support, authoritarian regimes are often strong enough to remain in power and suppress challenges to the status quo; such regimes are usually far better armed than their opponents, and do not feel constrained from exercising their advantage.

CROSSROADS

There appear to be four different outcomes to the aforementioned ethnic conflicts: voluntary integration, involuntary integration, secession, or chaos.

Voluntary integration of clashing ethnic groups within a state would see the groups resolving their differences to the extent that ethnic affiliation is no longer important. If this were to occur in Nigeria, for example, individuals would not identify themselves as Hausa, Yoruba, or Ibo, but would instead identify themselves as Nigerian. No one ethnic group would dominate the government or the military. Such an outcome is highly desirable because it would necessarily involve the peaceful resolution of ethnic conflict and would lay the basis for democracy. Voluntary integration, though, will be extremely difficult to bring about where ethnic conflict has been intense.

The involuntary integration of nations occurs if either the ethnically dominant majority (or minority) defeats its opponents, or a previously oppressed group ousts the heretofore dominant group and rules dictatorially. This is the current situation in many African countries. But involuntary integration cannot be maintained as easily as it was in the past, now that the great powers are generally uninterested in supporting African conflicts, and the growing demand for democracy has made dictatorial rule increasingly unacceptable to oppressed groups. As a consequence, it has become less possible to establish or maintain involuntary integration through a sharp, decisive spasm of violence. The dominant group may have to apply force to maintain power.

In those instances where relations between a regionally dominant minority and the rest of a country have become hostile, it may be impossible to achieve voluntary or involuntary integration. In such cases secession may make democratization easier for both parties after the conflict between them has ended. Secession, though, can pose serious problems. Among these is the complicated question of where the new border should be drawn, since ethnic groups do not live in neatly segregated areas; drawing a new border (or re-establishing a colonial border, as Eritrea and Somaliland have done) can be fraught with conflict. Finally, secession is only viable where there is a regionally dominant minority; it is not really an option for a widely scattered minority group.

The fourth outcome is not really an outcome at all, but the lack of one. If conflict cannot be resolved through voluntary integration, involuntary integration, or secession, then it may simply drag on. The conflict between Arabs and black Africans in southern Sudan is now in its third decade. In Angola, the struggle between the Mbundu and mestizoes Ged by the government) and the Ovimbundu fled by UNITA) is about to enter its third decade. The fact that there is now peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea shows that long-lived conflicts can be resolved; but it does not offer hope that such conflicts in other African states can be resolved easily, and that democratization can make significant progress in such situations.

These four outcomes have very different implications for democratization. Voluntary integration would clearly lay a firm basis for democracy. Secession can also create the basis for democracy where it did not exist. By contrast, involuntary integration by its very nature inhibits progress toward democratization, and dictators are usually more interested in retaining power than initiating a political process that will probably result in them losing it. Finally, democratization cannot flourish while widespread conflict is under way (though democratization may be part of the eventual resolution to such conflict).

AMERICA'S ROLE

During the cold war, Washington's concern abut the spread of Soviet influence led it to support the involuntary integration of countries under "friendly" dictatorships. As a result, American policy did little to advance democratization in Africa. In the post-cold war era, Africa is no longer strategically important to the United States. America, of course, has some economic interests in Africa, but these are minor compared to American economic ties to most other parts of the world.

But there are ways in which Africa's importance to the United States has grown. American concern about human rights issues has increased, as was demonstrated by United States participation in the **UN** effort to end starvation and bring peace to Somalia. Potentially more important is domestic political concern for Africa in the United States, particularly that of African-American groups; as African-Americans' political strength in the United States has increased, so has their ability to influence United States policy.

The end of the cold war allows American policy to view Africa from a new perspective. Africa's post-cold war lack of geostrategic or significant economic importance permits a degree of freedom and creativity in devising a new American foreign policy; America can now afford to be less concerned with geostrategy and more concerned with advancing the interests of Africans.

Promoting the voluntary integration of nations is an appealing policy to Americans because it matches their own domestic goal of creating a tolerant, pluralistic, multiethnic society. It would, though, only be effective where there is a desire for democratization and cooperation among different ethnic groups (as appears to be occurring in South Africa and Namibia), and in those places the United States government and nongovernmental organizations may be able to play a role. Helping organize political parties and free elections would obviously be useful—and there already is support for this through the United States Agency for International Development (**AID**), the National Endowment for Democracy (**NED**), and the various nongovernmental organizations they support. Equally important would be American help in adapting United States minority rights policies to the African context. This might include implementation of equal employment opportunity and affirmative actions programs, segments of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, and other aspects of American civil rights legislation. African-American groups (perhaps funded through **AID** or the **NED**) might be particularly effective in raising consciousness in African countries about the importance of safeguarding minority rights (and, in some cases, majority rights).

In cases where secession may be the only way to peacefully resolve ethnic conflicts and establish a firmer basis for democratization in the more stable successor states, American diplomacy could help negotiate a relatively peaceful divorce between the two sides. Washington can also play a role in establishing confidence-building measures, such as helping to resolve border disputes and other issues, and through the **UN**, organizing international peacekeeping forces to monitor the new border if necessary.

The most challenging situation, of course, is where there is severe ethnic conflict in which either the ruling group or a powerful nonruling group rejects democracy in favor of forced integration and dictatorship. Examples include Sudan, where the Arab Islamic fundamentalist regime is attempting to impose Sharia (Islamic law) on the non-Islamic black African population in southern Sudan (Equatoria); and Angola, where Savimbi has long attempted to gain power. In these situations, where a militarily powerful side refuses to negotiate, the United States may find it an option to provide arms to the other side so that it can put up a successful resistance.

Some may see such a step as abhorrent because it contributes to conflict. However, refusing to provide arms to the weaker side in such a conflict would signal American acquiescence to the triumph of whoever is militarily stronger and the establishment of an unjust, repressive, and undemocratic "peace." Arming the weaker side may lead to the creation of what I. William Zartman terms a "hurting stalemate"—a situation in which all parties to a conflict realize that a military victory is impossible—that continuing the conflict will not advance their interests, and that peaceful conflict resolution is the only way out of the situation.

Some may criticize these recommendations because they would damage American relations with many African governments. The question, though, which must be addressed by the United States and all those interested in American foreign policy toward Africa, is whether it should be America's goal to have good relations with Africa's dictatorial governments, or whether it should help the people of Africa achieve their aspirations for democracy.   •