

# Debates

## Comments on Democracy and Political Instability

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Anyang's writing on problems of democracy, authoritarian rule and presidentialism in Africa constitutes one of the most refreshing writings on Africa. This is especially true when the options suggested for Africa are generally grim and authoritarian. My comments are largely confined to the article in *Africa Development* which is, in a way, a neat summary of his reflections on these matters as he has discussed them in a number of his publications.

Anyang makes a link between democracy and development, which is at the same time useful and problematic. It is useful because it constitutes part of the long overdue reaction to a "consensus" that over many years theoretically lent support to nondemocratic rule and relegated the lives of much of humankind to various forms of authoritarian rule because that was the only way they or their countries could ever "develop". The new approach, for which Anyang has been the most ardent spokesperson in Africa, turn the tables against this approach and instead posits "developmental democracy" as a more viable and efficacious route. It is this that constitutes the problematic half of Anyang's views because his discourse in political

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- 1 In the last few years he has extensively written on the subject. See, for instance, "State and Society in Kenya: The Disintegration of the nationalist Coalitions and the Rise of Presidential Authoritarianism" *Africa Development* Vol. x1 no. 4, 1986; Introduction to P. Anyang Nyong'o (ed) *Popular Struggles for Democracy in Africa* (London: Zed Press, 1987); "Fighting for Democracy" (a review of Shivji's monograph "Fight my Beloved Continent: New Democracy in Africa") and the Review of Richard Sandbrook's book "The Politics of Africa's Stagnation" both in *Southern African Political and Economic Weekly*, March 1989.
- 2 Peter Anyang "Political Instability and the Prospects for Democracy in Africa", *Africa Development*, vol XIII n°1, 1988

regimes is still cast in purely instrumentalist terms and within an essentially "developmentalist" perspective.

Let me start by a brief presentation of Anyang's central thesis. "Democracy..is important to Africa's development in and of itself. At the centre of the failure of African states to chart viable paths for development (or industrialisation) is the issue of lack of accountability, hence of democracy as well"<sup>3</sup>

Lack of accountability leads to gross misuse of public resources and hence low levels of accumulation. Presumably, democracy, with its in-built accountability can lead to more responsible use of public resources and hence, high levels of development.

More categorically, Anyang states:

*"There has thus emerged a definite correlation between the lack of democracy in African politics and the deterioration in socio-economic conditions"*<sup>4</sup>.

*"...the issue of democracy is not only at the centre of the daily affairs of governance, it also influences the extent to which surpluses can be generated in the sphere of public ventures to ensure some accumulation"*<sup>5</sup>.

A second virtue of democracy as an instrument for development is that it ensures stability. Not only do the nonparticipatory structures lead to non-accountability and therefore misuse of surplus, they are "by their very nature, unstable" (p 75). Anyang then cites the case of Kenya and Ivory Coast as evidence of this salutary effect of participatory systems. The inclusion of Malawi among the "success stories" spoils the neat correlation, but this is treated as a more or less freaky case.

First, correlation does not suggest causation. It could be equally argued that the high rates of growth provided the state more room for making material concessions to a broader range of interests and could therefore permit the open articulation of these interests. Second, it is doubtful that such a correlation exists in Africa. The case of Malawi is not merely a quirk, as Anyang suggests, but typical

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3 *Africa Development* Vol. XIII n° 1

4 *Ibid*, p. 72.

5 *Ibid*, p. 73

of a number of cases in which high rates of accumulation have taken place under extremely repressive regimes. There is no *prima facie* case why democracy should lead to higher surplus generation. One could plausibly argue that since accumulation means postponed consumption and calls for "sacrifices", it will call forth authoritarian rule which has the "political will" and the military wherewithal to impose "austerity" or "discipline". It is no mere accident that the "libertarians" that call for "freeing" the economy are rarely at pains when that is accompanied by the chaining of the polity.

Anyang argues that the faith placed in developmental dictatorships by the Huntingtons and other "modernisers" turned out to be unfounded "because governing elites have chosen to privatise the state and personalize political power so as to meet their very narrow and private needs over and above any public good." This may be true but the answer may not be democratic rule but the replacement of existing "personal rule" with other types of "personal rule" or bureaucratic-authoritarian rule. These are the explicit suggestions of people like Ergas and Ekeh<sup>6</sup> and the implicit "realism" of people like Richard Sandbrook and Hyden.

For Ergas the bureaucratic-authoritarian option is suggested for Africa.

*Some students of the present economic crisis in Africa have wondered about the relevance of the Latin-American model of "bureaucratic authoritarianism" - a model based on a "dominant coalition" of high level technocrats, senior military officers, and powerful multinationals in a partnership with local entrepreneurs. The prevalent wisdom appears to be that the appropriate conditions do not yet exist, at least in most of the African continent, to enable that model to work. However, as an indication of what is involved - in terms of problems and promises - it is a concept well worth studying on a comparative basis, in preparation for the not-too-distant future when such a system may become relevant for some*

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6 Peter Ekeh, "Development Theory and the African Predicament", *Africa Development*, Vol XI, vol no. 4 1986

*of the larger African countries."*<sup>7</sup>

For Sandbrook, the solution is the one nondevelopmental "personal rule" (Bokassa, Idi Amin) with a developmental one Houphouet-Boigny, Kenyatta):

*"Realistically...our analysis does not suggest that democracy has any real prospect in the limiting conditions of contemporary Africa. What is the best feasible alternative? Decent, responsive and largely even-handed personal rule".*<sup>8</sup>

The fact that repression has not led to rapid rates of growth may only have shown that particular form of repression is not sufficient and perhaps even not necessary for capitalist accumulation. In itself, the failure of one form of repression does not establish the proposition that democracy might be better. The failure of one style of repression might strengthen the argument for trying something else including "developmental democracy"<sup>9</sup> but it says nothing about the possibilities of success of other alternatives. It could be that there are other "structural constraints" that would thwart accumulation in a country regardless of the political regime. Except among the fascist types who place high value in repression itself, most people would of course argue: "Better stagnation under democratic rule than stagnation under totalitarian rule". for this has so far been the real choice in Africa.

Were the choice simply more democracy the higher the accumulation, the social choice would be relatively easy, given the high value that many people place on both these goals, . Problems arise when there is a trade-off (real or imagined) between democracy and accumulation as has been suggested in the literature.

However, my main concern with Anyang's approach is its extremely instrumentalist view of democracy. Democracy is seen as an efficacious political means to development because: (a) Democracy will

7 Zaki Ergas, "Reflections on African Development", *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, Vol 5, No. 1/2 1986. Ergas adds in a footnote: "The question of the relevance of the Latin-American model is a popular theme among Africanist scholars" p. 33

8 Richard Sklar, "Developmental Democracy", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 29 No. 4, 1987.

9 Ibid

ensure accountability and therefore optimum use of surpluses and (b) it will ensure stability and thus once again, development.

A number of political scientists have felt outdone by economists who have developed "economic means" for development. Sklar has explicitly called for political scientists to also develop "political means" for development. Sklar, like Anyang ends up extracting from democracy - accountability:

*"The norm of accountability appears to be the most widely practiced of democratic principles; it is by far more prevalent in the world than freedom of association to compete for governmental office, or popular participation in authoritative decision-making, or the right to dissent from official policies without fear of retaliation. These principles, which underlie constitutional forms of democracy, appeal to broad sections of the population in all countries. But they are rarely established all at once. Democracy comes to every country in fragments or parts; each fragment becomes an incentive for the addition of another".*<sup>10</sup>

Sklar here leaves us with a highly truncated "democracy" reduced to the notion of "accountability" which can apparently be sustained even in the absence of the most elemental aspects of democracy - "freedom of association to compete for governmental office,... popular participation in authoritative decision-making, ... the right to dissent from official policies without fear of retaliation". The issues that he is willing to temporarily suspend on the hope that other "fragments" will come have a "pie-in-the-sky" ring to them and besmirch, or at least, compromise the whole notion of "developmental democracy".

High growth rates require high levels of savings and both these can be achieved in extremely undemocratic ways with accountability intact. "Savings" of one social group can be transferred to one group that may use these resources in an efficient way to enhance its private property. The state overseeing this process may be "accountable" to the small group and may even pride itself of high levels of probity in the management of public resources. The case of Malawi that Anyang cites may fall into this category.

The arguments advanced in favour of any political system, including

10 Ibid

democracy are derived from questions that give primacy to "development". However, within the "developmentalist" discourse, these arguments are extremely fragile, being essentially instrumentalist and therefore easily replaceable by other more efficacious instruments of development. This is particularly so given the conjunctural nature of capitalist accumulation. Thus while some phases may accommodate democracy others may call for "shock treatments" in which democratic rule is suspended in the name of development, adjustment or stabilisation. Exercise of democratic rights would assume a conjunctural character, reflective of the vagaries of the developmental or accumulation path to which the rights will have been harnessed.

Hence once the question of democracy is subsumed under the "developmental problematique" then it can be easily challenged by the evidence of rapid growth under fascist rule. Within that problematique, the characterisation of states is whether they are "developmental" (good) or "non-developmental" (bad). Among the "developmental states" are listed Taiwan, South Korea, Brazil in the sixties and seventies. The "developmental" label immediately overshadows other unsavoury characteristics these states may have. Indeed once so described, it becomes "idealistic" to point to the authoritarian structures of these regime.

"Development" is too precarious a concept on which to hang democracy. The struggle for democracy must be for democracy in its own right. This is not to deny that democracy may have instrumental value in the development process. Indeed, when development is described broadly to include equity and participation, and not in the simple GDP-growth version that Anyang adopts, democracy may provide the political scaffolding for the policy instruments compatible to this broader concept of development. However, I would rather see these benefits of democracy as windfall gains, albeit extremely important ones, given the wretched material conditions of our people.

I believe the question of democracy in Africa must be raised in its own right. Democracy should be on the agenda, not because of its instrumental, developmental impact, but because it is the recognition of the legitimate rights of the African people to democratically map the destinies of their countries, to determine the rates and types of development they want etc. It should be an object of value in itself. It alone should provide the set of values against which to assess policies and economic performance and should not merely be judged by its facilitation of developmental policies and economic performance. If democracy can also accelerate accumulation so much the better but that should not be its fundamental premise.