

Democracy and Africa are two ideas that have not always fitted together comfortably. Having survived colonization and decolonization, it has only been in the last 20 years that most parts of Africa, including the Commonwealth countries, have had democratic governments running them. The legacies of dictators like Idi Amin and Sani Abacha still form western ideals of what democracy looks like in Africa. But in the past few years there have been several elections in Commonwealth countries which have been widely regarded as free and fair by the international community. Democracy is a fine balance that needs constant attention and maintenance, and this paper intends to show the constant dangers posed to democracy in African Commonwealth states. But what exactly is the term 'democracy' being referred to mean? In the strictest sense, it refers to the peaceful method of changing governments. But there is more to it than that, as states have to fulfill many obligations before they can begin to be defined as democratic. There is, of course, the holding of free and fair elections that lead to a representative government, consisting of politicians that are committed to serving the people rather than themselves. A free and independent media is vital to a democracy, as an outlet to analyse and criticize its politicians and their decisions. Democracy can also be measured by the freedom its citizens have, regardless of their age, gender, colour, ethnicity, and so on.

The most obvious starting point for looking at the dangers posed to African democracy is the elections themselves. African Commonwealth countries do not have a distinguished history when it comes to elections, and 2007 was a particularly bad vintage. Nigeria, the most populous country in Africa with a population of over 150 million people, has had its fair share of disputed elections. Its most recent, in 2007, proved to be no different. Although Umaru Musa Yar'Adua of the ruling People's Democratic Party won with 70% of the vote, there were reports of widespread fraud and violence. The Commonwealth Observer Group called the election a 'missed opportunity', saying that they were even worse than the disputed 2003 elections. Nigerians deserve much better than they are getting; the vast oil wealth it contains requires a strong and fair government to manage this better and to benefit the people better, but this is yet to happen. At the time of writing, Yar'Adua had just died from a long suffering illness, adding more drama to next year's election which is due to vote in a Muslim northerner as part of the system of rotation in place. For sub-Saharan's second biggest economy, it is vital that a free and fair election is held. Presidential elections in Kenya in 2007 made world headlines for all the wrong reasons, after widespread violence left over 1,500 people dead. Elections held there in 2002 were widely regarded as democratic, voting out the ruling party that had been in power since independence in 1963. After what was described as Kenya's most competitive elections, Raila Odinga was said to have beaten president Mwai Kibaki, but official results that were delayed eventually

announced Kibaki the winner, with large question marks being left over the handling of the final results. Unrest led to violence that took on ethnic divisions, requiring former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan to intervene and assist the setting up of a coalition government. Although much of the violence was based upon historical land and social injustices, the questionable election served as a catalyst to bring tensions to the surface. The coalition government is still intact today, although progress has been slow and worries remain about the possibility of further violence at the next presidential elections in 2012. As Kenya is the commercial hub of East Africa, it is also vital that elections in 2012 are free and fair. These two elections were in two of the most significant countries of the continent, which has ramifications in each of their regions. If Nigeria and Kenya are to encourage democratic elections in each of their sphere of influence, they had best start with their own.

In his book *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles*, Richard Dowden likens corruption in Africa to a cancer, where it 'has taken over the body. It is the system'.¹ This forms what appears to be an unshakable image of Africa, such as the 419 internet scam that has its origins in Nigeria. Guy Arnold has argued that Africa is probably no more corrupt than other continents, yet this has constantly been used as a tool for the West to 'manipulate economic and political behavior' of African states.² Like much else with Africa, corruption is not a uniform problem in each state. When huge quantities of aid are poured into countries without the infrastructure to deal with it are in place, it is difficult to avoid people trying to take what they consider their 'fair share'. This has been highlighted in recent literature like 'Dead Aid' by Dambiso Moyo.³ In the Transparency International corruption index of 2009, Sierra Leone, Cameroon and Kenya come up worst for African Commonwealth countries (tied 146th out of 180), followed by Nigeria, Uganda and Mozambique tied on 130th. In a global perspective, this is not a relatively bad performance, but in countries with developing economics, corruption still represents a major hurdle. Corruption, money-laundering and patronage politics are problems that member states have to resolve by themselves, as the Commonwealth is a collection of member states, not a police force. Some improvement has been seen recently, such as recent arrests of prominent government officials by the Anti-Corruption Commission in Sierra Leone, and the setting up in most states of some form of anti-corruption organizations. However, the continent still has some way to go to remove this 'cancer'.

¹ Richard Dowden, *Africa: Altered States, Ordinary Miracles* (London, Portobello Books, 2008).

² Guy Arnold, *Africa: A Modern History* (London, Atlantic Books, 2006).

³ Dambiso Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa* (London, Allen Lane, 2009).

The Commonwealth, as it is widely known and celebrated, is phenomenally diverse, with many different languages, cultures, ethnicities, and so on. Africa is no different, and how some of the smaller sections of a society are represented is important to a healthy democracy. Rhoda Howard wrote in 1986 that the rights of minorities in Commonwealth Africa have been ignored in favour of the national majority in the nation-making process.⁴ Since then Africa has made improvements in the treatment of minorities, such as the empowerment of women in the post-war reconstruction of Sierra Leone, which the Commonwealth has assisted in. But other minorities have not fared so well, such as homosexuals. Homosexuality goes against many traditional African beliefs, to the point where governments are taking action against it. Gay sex is illegal in 37 African countries, and Commonwealth states such as Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria and Uganda there are strong views against homosexuality being accepted by society, largely due to religious beliefs.⁵ A recent attempt by the Ugandan government to pass a bill that would bring about the death penalty for 'aggravated homosexuality' drew international criticism, although the law has yet to be passed. Malawi too is taking strong action against homosexuals, with Malawi church leaders describing homosexuality as 'sinful' and the high profile arrest of two men after their wedding ceremony. Perhaps this perceived increase in homophobia has more to do with a greater dialogue taking place in the respective countries, but how the issue is dealt with puts a spotlight not only on democracy but on human rights standards, something the Commonwealth is sworn to uphold.

A free press is another fundamental institution in a democracy, and with African Commonwealth states having relatively high literacy levels, newspapers in particular are a popular way of keeping up with politics. When a seemingly unpopular government is in office, it is the press that provides the greatest criticism of their actions and can often take the role of the official opposition and is thus the first target for retributions. Zimbabwe, before it left the Commonwealth in 2003, provides a fascinating case study of this. Newspaper editor Geoffrey Nyarota founded the *Daily News* at about the same time that the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) was galvanizing support against Robert Mugabe's government, and although they were never officially in collusion, the *Daily News* and MDC became vital allies in the fight for democracy, which unfortunately ended in the bombing of the printing plant in January 2001, closing the newspaper.⁶ A bizarre case in Zambia recently highlighted the lengths that some papers will go to when criticizing the government. In an effort to highlight the damage to the

⁴ Rhoda Howard, *Human Rights in Commonwealth Africa* (Totowa, Rowman and Littlefield, 1986), p. 92.

⁵ The Pew Research Centre for the People & the Press, *Religious Beliefs Underpin Opposition to Homosexuality* (<http://people-press.org/report/?pageid=765>).

⁶ Geoffrey Nyarota, *Against the Grain; Memoirs of a Zimbabwean Newsman* (Cape Town, Zebra Press 2006).

health system being caused by a nurses strike, *The Post* published pictures of a woman giving birth outside a hospital after being refused admission, which Zambian president Rupiah Banda took issue with. The news editor, Chansa Kabwela was arrested for the distributing obscene images, but the case was eventually dismissed. It is not an uncommon sight on the streets of African cities to see groups of people huddled around various newspapers every morning, discussing and arguing about the front page. This is perhaps one of the greatest pillars of democracy in Africa, and is also one of the first to be attacked by undemocratic forces. Any attempt to suppress the media in these countries should serve as the warning sign.

Africa is 'blessed' with an abundance of natural resources, some that have been around for a while and some that are new. The difficulty facing those states with oil, gold, diamonds, uranium and the like is how to let the wealth of these areas make its way down to the general population, rather than letting the ruling parties line their pockets with the profits. This is a challenge that is not unique to Africa, and for some states this new found wealth puts them in uncharted territory. One such place is Uganda, which recently had oil discovered in Lake Albert. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni is said to have sent officials around the world discovering how best to manage this new commodity, in a bid to avoid some of the problems that somewhere like Nigeria has experienced with oil. But this new found wealth also has the potential to fuel corruption and to encourage the ruling party to hold on to power – Museveni has already abolished presidential term limits. Ghana too has recently discovered oil deposits, but is being more transparent than Uganda in its efforts reap the rewards for its own citizens. Nigeria is the obvious example of how not to manage oil; its Niger Delta is riddled with piracy, the environment around the oil wells has been ruined and too few Nigerians have benefited from the tremendous wealth the country possesses. There is a growing international interest in Africa's resources, including the likes of Iran, Venezuela and China, for which African states must be prepared to do business with their citizen's interests in mind. It is still too early to say for certain that Africa's natural resources are a 'blessing'; it is vital that the lessons from South Africa's gold to Sierra Leone's blood diamonds are learned and that these commodities are managed properly.

African Commonwealth states enjoy cordial relations with each other, and conflict between them seems highly unlikely. The major security problems that are faced by these states come from non-Commonwealth neighbours. Kenya has suffered from its proximity to Somalia, not only by way of the dangers of maritime piracy, but by soldiers fleeing over the border to escape the war. Kenya has been forced to reinforce its border security after a series of abductions and a growing refugee problem. The

newest member of the Commonwealth, Rwanda, is still engaged in conflict with forces from the Democratic Republic of Congo in a war that goes back to the 1994 Rwandan Genocide, and was one of the main objections to them joining the Commonwealth in 2009. Uganda, Tanzania and Zambia all suffer from refugee problems as a result of the continued war in the Congo. Some of Africa's security issues have global implications, such as the Nigerian born Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab responsible for the attempted bombing of an American airliner in 2009, and the rumoured growth of Al Qaeda in East Africa. These security dilemmas show that it is not only important that these Commonwealth states maintain their good relations with each other, but that they work on their relations with their neighbours and with the international community.

No discussion on damaging democracy in Africa would be complete without reference to Zimbabwe. Although not presently a Commonwealth member state, it is likely to resume membership in the coming years as its unity government begins the repair work after a decade of devastation. Zambia and Botswana were the most vocal when it came to denouncing Mugabe, but the silence from South Africa was deafening. Former president Thabo Mbeki's policy of 'quiet diplomacy' did eventually produce the Global Political Agreement (GPA) between the three main parties, but it came at a huge cost, in both humanitarian and economic terms. With roughly a quarter of the population of Zimbabwe displaced, it is imperative that the diaspora are encouraged to return, and that all conditions agreed in the GPA are met. The credibility of both South Africa and the Commonwealth have suffered over the situation with Zimbabwe, so bringing back stability to this once prosperous country will go some way to restoring that. By doing so, the Commonwealth will reaffirm the principles set out in the Harare Declaration of 1991, such as the belief that 'international peace and order, global economic development and the rule of international law are essential to the security and prosperity of mankind'.

Africa has much to be optimistic of; its destiny is in its own hands as to what the future holds for it. Many people condemn the increased presence of China in Africa, because of their questionable record on human rights and their policy to do business with anybody, but it is entirely up to these states to do choose who they do business with. African's Commonwealth states share a similar history, but are very diverse, and so too are the dangers posed to these democracies. As we have seen, these dangers can be in the form of fraudulent elections, corruption, persecution of minorities, a stifled media, misused natural resources, conflict and failed states. At the closing of the World Economic Forum in Tanzania, South African President Jacob Zuma called for 'the strengthening of oversight institutions that

can support and maintain the entrenchment of democracy in Africa'.⁷ This is illustrative of the important role the Commonwealth has to play in Africa, especially where regional organizations like the African Union and Southern African Development Community have disappointed. If these pitfalls can be avoided and reversed, then Africa has a bright future.

⁷ South African Government Information, 'President Jacob Zuma concludes working visit to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania', 7th May 2010 (<http://www.info.gov.za/speeches/2010/10051009051002.htm>).