Human Rights and Democratisation
Learning from Europe?

Kum' a Ndumbe III

* *Kum' a Ndumbe III is Cameroonian and professor of political sciences. He presently gives lectures on development efficiency of international cooperation and conflict prevention and resolution in Africa at the Department of Political Science of the Free University of Berlin, Germany.*

1. Learning from Europe

When African States obtained independence in the sixties and seventies, they received models of European constitutions to be applied on their specific countries. The Westminster model of a democratic state was applied to former English colonies, and the constitution of the French 5th Republic was copied for the former French territories. By doing this, Europe gave African States a modern structure to govern, but Africans had first to learn how to deal with these new frameworks. In some countries there were intellectuals who had studied political science in Europe or in from Europe conceived universities in some African colonies, but they were very few and did not have the needed experience in managing democratic constitutions and institutions. Because they did not get this experience in the colonial time, key administrations were supported by European experts and "technical counsellors" working within ministries and several administrative structures. After independence, Africans were sent to Europe to be trained in various fields of the management of a modern State, in politics, law, economics, security etc. Part of the training were theoretical lectures tackling topics like the respect of law, human rights and democratisation. In African States themselves, universities where built up and departments of law and economics where set up with European contents and textbooks. Political systems were taught to African students, and they were exclusively European or American. It is not exaggerate to say that from independence until now, African scholars and politicians have mainly been trained through European and American political thoughts and practices. It is true that human rights and democratisation were not central issues in these training programs during the Cold War period.

A substantial change occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a **"wind of change"** waved over the whole continent, Africans went to the streets to claim democracy and human rights. From 1990, Europe again came with various programs to train Africans in strengthening the public sector, improving the competence of Government and in implementing Human Rights and Democratisation. Through the "Caisse Française de Coopération" and the ACCT, France promotes programs on Democratisation and Human Rights,

Great Britain in 1992 established the UK Westminster Foundation for Democracy to get involved in Africa, the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Germany through its various political Foundations like Friedrich-Ebert-, Konrad Adenauer-, Friedrich-Naumann-, Heinrich-Böll-, and recently Rosa-Luxemburg Stiftung are deeply involved in the promotion of Democracy and Human Rights in Africa. They finance the main budget for these activities, even when the local Government is not financing anything. Lessons learnt from the European Experience in Europe and in the engagement of Europe in Africa and other parts of the world are implemented in the training and in other activities of European Organisations in Africa. It is therefore correct to assert that Africa is learning a lot from Europe in this specific field of Human Rights and Democratisation since independence.

2. The Legacy of Corruption in political Systems since Colonialism and Neo-colonialism

How effective was the European influence in Human Rights and Democracy in Africa since independence? Without analysing the purpose of effectiveness, the claim to promote Human Rights and Democratisation by foreign States occur to be not more than propaganda or just an alibi for a European country to be present on the political field of a chosen African country.

The European or American oriented and Democracy-inspired constitutions of the Sixties or Seventies obviously failed to establish Democracy as a system of Government in African countries. We should ask ourselves why? The first reason is that the modern democratic system as promoted by Europe and America was completely new on the African political scene, even before colonialism. The second reason is that during colonialism, the political system was based on the exclusion of the African population, decisions were made by the colonial masters, without asking the concerned Africans anything about their fate. This dictatorial principle of Government could not favour any democratic alternative without endangering the basic structures of the colonial power. Nazism, fascism and colonialism were no good examples for the promotion of Democracy in African colonies. While most colonial countries were run democratically, Europe did not accept Democracy to be spread over the African colonies. From Europe at that time, Africa learnt dictatorship, exclusion, dis-crimination, apartheid, denial of Human Rights, in some cases even the denial of being a human being. These were the lessons learnt in the various African political systems during the colonial time. There was no tradition of respecting human rights and ruling with a democratic system when colonial powers retreated from Africa. The new independent Governments could not refer to any democratic experience or consequent respect of Human Rights in their countries. The struggle for liberation and independence was the first step towards a democratic alternative. But this attempt was prejudiced by the lack of experience in democratic rule by African leaders, even themselves were not trained in democratic rule and most of them were no democrats. In addition to this, the huge task of Nation-building lead to constraints and unilateral decisions from the elite in power and we should consider the context of the Cold War. East and West were competing for influence in Africa, and Europe needed dictators, not democrats, to save its interests on the African continent. While even Portugal and Spain had switched to democratic rule, Europe was imposing dictatorial heads of State on Africa to stop the influence of the East or of the West. After independence, Africa learnt from Europe dictatorship, exclusion of the population from political decisions, corruption in management and in the electoral system, just to enable dictators to stay in power. Mobutu is one of the prominent examples of this system. Since he was brought to power in the Congo by the CIA, he installed one of the most dramatic corrupted dictatorships in Africa and he was frequently supported politically, economically and militarily by the West, even when opposition tried to overthrow him. These dictatorial regimes in Africa supported by European powers during the Cold War denied Human Rights to their populations. They could survive for forty years by installing a political culture of patrimonial system, clientelism and generalised corruption. This is what Africa did learn from Europe in the four decades after independence. Nordic States partly tried to apply a different policy, in supporting liberation movements and progressive African Governments, but their influence compared to that of France, England, Belgium and Portugal has been rather small.

After the Cold War, European States with their NGOs suddenly decided to promote Democracy and Human Rights in Africa. These organisations came with models and solutions for Africans and brought also the money to implement them. They did not first analyse the

political structures of African States with their African counterparts, interrogate the adequacy or inadequacy of the models they wanted to apply, before inviting Africans to cooperate in projects or programs. Most of these Governments and organisations utilised Democracy and Human Rights as a new instrument of foreign policy, a mean to get influence in the chosen country and to put pressure on local African governments in order to achieve other goals like the liberalisation of markets. In opposition to the European Policy towards Africa since Slavery, Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism, Democracy and Human Rights in the nineties were suddenly declared universal values and the justification was found to intervene in African politics against governments opposing the trends. But the French policy towards Africa under François Mittérand for example showed clearly that not the promotion of Democracy and Human Rights, but the saving of French interests motivated French engagement in Africa.

3. Necessary paths towards sustainable implementation of human rights and democratisation

It is not possible to solve the problem of a sustainable implementation of human rights and democratisation in Africa, if the question of political systems and political structures is not answered. We can not further ignore this fundamental question: *which kind of political system is suitable for this or that African country?* Stating that Democracy is the most suitable political system because of its universality is refusing to admit that Africa has been exploited and traumatised by countries ruled under Democracy , that on behalf of the policy of these Governments, Africans were denied the right to be ruled by the systems they inherited from their own political history.

Today, Africans need to
- rediscover the political systems that managed their countries for centuries and millenaries
- analyse the failures and the positive trends of these historical systems
- understand how it was possible to maintain the cohesion of the pre-colonial State and why those systems collapsed under the pressure of internal contradictions, slavery or colonialism and point out:

  o the question of the relation between the individual and society and the State
  o the protection of citizens by the law
  o the mechanisms of the balance of power
  o the role of women and of the youth in political structures

All these aspects should be clarified in the political structures that historically composed the actual African States. The results of all these investigations will be of great importance for the present stability of African States because it will be possible to understand what is suitable for the people living in a precise region of Africa, with which political system they are able to identify themselves, and how it is possible to connect these systems with modern mechanisms of Democracy and Human Rights. This path has not been really followed in the present African States. Donor countries and institutions focussed on importing models and structures without any historical reference to Africa and everybody is waiting for a sustainable success. To clarify the necessity of the mentioned path, I just want to compare the French tradition of centralism in the management of governmental affairs and the German federal system. Both are democratic countries, but the Germans would strongly oppose the French tradition of a central State in the implementation of policy in Germany, and they would be right, because

the German population would not be able to identify itself with the French understanding of a central State. Promoting Democracy in Germany after the Nazi regime in the sense of a central State would not have had much success, and the case of the failure of the GDR remains highly interesting for research in political science.

4. Consequences for Conflict Prevention and Resolution in Sub-Saharan Africa

Conflict prevention and resolution cannot be run outside a political system. It should be part of a generally accepted political framework. Even the will to prevent and resolve conflicts should come from a commonly shared acceptance of the way policy should be made in a country. Conflict prevention and resolution aim to keep or restore a generally accepted order in a society, an order that secures the balance between its different groups in history, politics, economics, philosophy and spirituality. Actually, African postcolonial States have not reached the stage of establishing this kind of generally accepted order. They have lost the order that prevailed in the time before colonialism, the foreign order in the colony was not set up for the safety of the society, but for its exploitation. The order after independence is also substantially foreign and does not reflect the cultural and political legacy of the population, nor does it satisfy the urgent needs of its citizens. In this case, it is difficult for conflict prevention and conflict resolution to work because it is not clear for which ideal, for which accepted order people are devoting themselves for restoration. It is not enough to argue that Democracy is a universal value, or that Democracy is the preeminently acceptable form of Government to mobilise an African population for conflict prevention or conflict management. Africans should first identify themselves with that Democracy before being able to mobilise their material and spiritual forces to work for the reestablishment of the disturbed order. But to mobilise themselves for any form of Democracy, Africans should first redefine the political systems they want to have, conceive a suitable form of modern State, reconcile history, politics, philosophy, spirituality and economics and build up a generally accepted and coherent State framework for individuals and society. Modern achievements of universal values, concepts and models should be taken into account and integrated in the process of formulating this modern framework but should not constitute the basic references.

The framework alone is not sufficient. The methodology of approach in the implementation of conflict prevention and conflict resolution should be impregnated with cultural values and behaviours of the people of the region. The culture of Palaver and Consensus, the culture of dancing and singing in various events of life, the spiritual involvement of the ancestors in the daily activities cannot be ignored in the implementation of conflict prevention and resolution in Africa. It is however important to build up a modern framework for this approach and to enable it to function not only in the village, but also at city and State level.

By reinventing the inherited African political systems, by researching a synthesis with modern needs of the population and universal achievements in culture, policy, economics, sciences, technology and security, Africa will go toward a profound renaissance. This renaissance will embrace all areas of life in modern African societies and secure a sustainable equilibrium. In this context, conflicts will be drastically reduced, conflict prevention and conflict resolution will be supported by large parts of the population as by investing their personal energy and public means, people will be defending the restoration of an order they identify themselves with. The promotion of this approach is the real challenge for international cooperation in the next decades.