

Africa in Transition

LESSON 2

Politics and Government Update

As discussed in *Africa in Transition*, Africa is home to a variety of different political systems. While many states remain authoritarian, since 1990 democracy and political freedom have been gaining ground on the continent. These gains have led to talk of an “African Renaissance.” This update examines the cases of South Africa, Kenya, and Nigeria, as well as the current state of the African Renaissance.

SOUTH AFRICA AFTER APARTHEID

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In 1994, South Africa held the first multiracial elections in its history. The African National Congress (ANC) won, and Nelson Mandela was sworn in as the country’s first black president. He confronted many difficult problems such as continuing social and economic discrimination, as well as the need to reorganize national, provincial, and local governmental institutions under a new, nonracial constitution. Mandela also led the way toward national reconciliation among the races. A Truth and Reconciliation Commission, presided over by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, sought to bring to light the atrocities committed during the apartheid era. Pardons were given to those who confessed to their crimes.

Toward the end of his five-year term, Mandela announced his intention to retire from politics. In 1999, vice president Thabo Mbeki, who was also the leader of the ANC, was elected the country’s second post-apartheid president. Mbeki won reelection in 2004. During Mbeki’s tenure, South Africa’s democracy and economy strengthened. The country became one of the continent’s most stable states and a regional leader in terms of foreign diplomacy. Indeed, Mbeki won praise for his efforts to end civil wars in Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

However, Mbeki had trouble combating corruption, rampant crime, high unemployment, and widespread poverty. While the government took steps to support black entrepreneurs and a growing black middle class, most of the country’s wealth has remained in white hands. Indeed, South Africa continues to have one of the most unequal societies in the world. Economic growth, while better than during the apartheid years, is still not strong enough to lift the country’s millions of impoverished citizens out of poverty. Mbeki was also sharply criticized for working with Robert Mugabe’s repressive regime in Zimbabwe.

Another key issue has been HIV/AIDS. Many blame Mbeki for South Africa’s slow and inadequate response to its explosive HIV/AIDS epidemic. South Africa has more than 5 million people living with HIV/AIDS, the highest number in the world. Almost one in five South Africans is HIV positive.¹ The prohibitive cost of antiretroviral drugs has meant that most of the country’s infected people have had little or no treatment. Fortunately, in 2003, South African pharmaceutical companies began producing generic antiretroviral drugs, and, in 2004, the government strengthened its efforts to address the disease. While there is still ample room for improvement, progress has been made. For example, by 2007, the number of HIV-positive

pregnant women who received antiretroviral drugs rose to 66 percent, and 42 percent of all infected South Africans received antiretroviral treatment.²

Although President Mbeki was constitutionally limited to two terms in office as president, in December 2007 party elections he ran for a third term as leader of the ANC, hoping to hold on to power in the country's dominant political grouping. However, because of the widespread dissatisfaction with his government, he lost. Leadership of the ANC went to the charismatic Jacob Zuma, who just two years earlier had been dismissed as deputy president by Mbeki amid charges of corruption. In September 2008, Mbeki was accused of influencing the prosecution in Zuma's trial and was asked by the ANC to step down as president. Kgalema Motlanthe, the deputy leader of the ANC and a close ally of Zuma, became the interim president. As head of the ANC, Zuma has a major advantage in becoming South Africa's next president during elections in the spring of 2009.

KENYA

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In October 2001, longtime Kenyan President Daniel arap Moi announced that he would soon step down. Elections took place in December 2002, and voters elected Mwai Kibaki of the National Rainbow Coalition. Kibaki defeated Moi's Kenyan African National Union (KANU) party and its candidate, Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of the country's first president. For the first time since independence in 1963, a candidate from a party other than KANU had won the presidency.

Kenya was once one of the most prosperous and stable countries in Africa. However, when Kibaki took power in 2003, the country's economy was in shambles, largely because of the rampant corruption under arap Moi's authoritarian regime. In 2003, Transparency International ranked Kenya the 11th most corrupt country in the world out of 133 countries surveyed.³ The International Monetary Fund largely withheld aid from the East African state between 1997 and 2003 because of its widespread corruption.

Shortly after taking office, Kibaki launched a reform program aimed at tackling corruption, strengthening democracy, improving education, and generating economic growth. He promised to deliver a new constitution within 100 days. The IMF and World Bank rewarded these efforts by resuming their aid programs to Kenya. However, despite economic recovery (between 2003 and 2007 economic growth averaged 5.3 percent), many concerns remain.⁴ In 2005, voters rejected a controversial new constitution, partly because it did not establish a strong prime minister position to counter the power of the president. Corruption remains a major problem: Transparency International still ranks Kenya as one of the most corrupt countries in the world.⁵ It is estimated that losses due to graft amount to \$1 billion a year.⁶

Even more, the December 2007 presidential election led to widespread unrest, when both President Kibaki and the opposition leader, Raila Odinga, claimed victory. The country fell into post-election violence that killed more than 1,000 people and displaced 300,000. It took two months and mediation from former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan for the rivals to agree to share power, with Mwai Kibaki remaining as president and Raila Odinga assuming the new post of prime minister. The new coalition government plans to draft a new constitution by April 2009.

NIGERIA

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In 1999, the election of Olusegun Obasanjo ended 16 years of military rule in Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country. Obasanjo was reelected in 2003, adding a sense of stability to the country, which continues to struggle to become a more democratic and free society. He won praise for his efforts to tackle some of the country’s many challenges, enacting programs to stem corruption and improve democracy, human rights, and freedom of the press. He worked to keep the military out of politics and to recover funds stolen by previous leaders.

In 2007, Obasanjo completed his second term in office and stepped down as president. He handpicked the former governor of Nigeria’s northern state of Katsina, Umaru Yar’Adua, as his successor. Yar’Adua won the April 2007 presidential elections with over 70 percent of the vote. International observers, however, described the elections as flawed, with evidence of vote rigging.

President Yar’Adua inherited deep-seated challenges, such as crime, poverty, corruption, ethnic and religious tensions, and serious environmental concerns surrounding the country’s oil industry. As a result of these issues and Yar’Adua’s slow reform progress, the oil-producing Niger Delta has been plagued by strikes, vandalism, and militant attacks on oil facilities, with people demanding justice and a more equal share of oil revenues. Indeed, despite Nigeria’s tremendous oil wealth, 70 percent of Nigerians continue to live on less than \$1 a day, and 92 percent of Nigerians live on less than \$2 a day.⁷

AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

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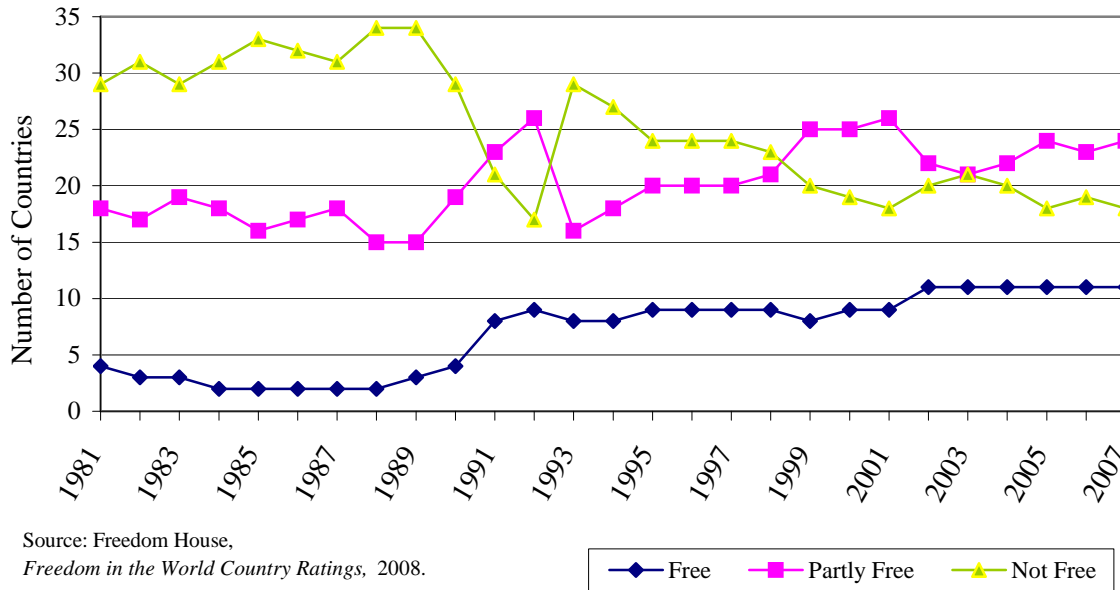
Between 1989 and 1992, the number of states in Africa where people were able to participate freely in the political process tripled, jumping from three to nine. The number of states considered at least “partly free” almost doubled, going from 15 to 26. The number of countries considered “not free” declined by half, dropping from 34 to 17 (see Chart 1, page 4). Key success stories during this period included Benin, Cape Verde, Malawi, Mali, São Tomé and Príncipe, and South Africa. Africa seemed poised for a political renaissance.

This political rebirth occurred for several reasons. First, many Africans recognized that authoritarianism had generated neither economic growth nor political stability. They concluded it was time to go in a new direction. Second, after the collapse of Soviet communism, many authoritarian African governments that had relied on the Soviet Union and its allies for political and economic support lost their aid. These governments recognized that it was time for a change. Third, after communism’s collapse, the only source of economic assistance came from institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, as well as Western governments. Aid and development money began to flow primarily to democratically elected governments.

Yet, as often happens, the forces of the past came into conflict with the forces of rebirth. By the turn of the century, the renaissance was somewhat less vibrant than it had appeared to be only a few years earlier. While, the number of states in which people freely participated in the political process remained roughly the same, several states took significant steps backward. Why did the renaissance stall? It is important to consider that many African states have yet to develop the

political culture required to create and maintain a democracy. In order to maintain democracy, all major political actors must accept fair and free elections, the rule of law, the concept of majority rule with protection of minority rights, civilian control over the military, and an independent news media.

Chart 1
Political Freedom in Africa 1980 - 2007



(click here for enlarged version of chart)

Even more, additional progress has been made in the 2000s, and it is important to note that Africa is a vast continent where positive examples can get lost when one focuses on broad issues and difficult cases. For example, in 2003, Liberia’s brutal fourteen-year-long civil war came to an end. In November 2005, the country elected Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as Africa’s first popularly elected female president. Since the 2005 elections, the political situation has remained stable and the country’s economy is on a path towards recovery. President Sirleaf has taken a public stance against corruption and has dismissed a number of corrupt government officials.

Another encouraging development has been the creation of the African Union (AU) out of the old Organization of African Unity (OAU). The AU works to establish political and economic union across the entire continent. It also works to protect human rights and strengthen peace in Africa through peacekeeping missions. Finally, since 1995, Africa has averaged between 2.7 and 6.5 percent annual economic growth, including a continent-wide average of 6 percent over the last four years, helping rekindle talk of an African Renaissance (see the update for Lesson 3, “Economics”).⁸

For more recent information, please visit the timelines at www.southerncenter.org.

Christopher L. Brown and Bozena Radwanska Zayac
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¹ The Henry J. Kaiser Foundation, “HIV/AIDS Policy Fact Sheet,” June 2008, <http://www.kff.org/hiv/aids/upload/3030-11.pdf> (accessed July 25, 2008).

² UNAIDS, “Progress Report On Declaration Of Commitment On HIV And AIDS, Republic of South Africa,” http://data.unaids.org/pub/Report/2008/south_africa_2008_country_progress_report_en.pdf, (accessed June 24, 2008).

³ Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index 2003,” http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2003 (accessed June 24, 2008).

⁴ World Economic Outlook Database, April 2008 edition (International Monetary Fund), <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2008/01/weodata/index.aspx> (Kenya: Gross Domestic Product, constant prices 2002-2007).

⁵ Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index 2007,” http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2007 (accessed June 24, 2008).

⁶ Library of Congress, “Country profile: Kenya,” June 2007, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/frd/cs/profiles/Kenya.pdf> (accessed September 23, 2008).

⁷ Table “3: Human and Income Poverty: Developing Countries,” in *Human Development Report 2007/2008: Fighting Climate Change; Human Solidarity in a Divided World*, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_20072008_en_complete.pdf (accessed July 24, 2008).

⁸ World Economic Outlook Database, April 2008 (Africa: Gross Domestic Product, constant prices 1995-2007).