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**Africa's Development Challenge:
From Predatory to Accountable Government**

by Robert Guest

When you love someone, you always want the best for her. I have loved Africa since I first set foot there eight years ago, and I have spent most of the last six years trying to figure out why the place has been such a mess. For me, that is arguably the most important question there is.

Africa is not just the poorest continent in the world. It is the only continent that has actually gotten poorer in the last quarter of a century—and that is an astounding failure. Knowledge is cumulative. You do not have to reinvent the internal combustion engine or the joint stock company. Things should progress. There are also masses of capital splashing around the world, looking for good ideas to fund in order to make a profit. But that capital has not gone to Africa. So what has happened?

The Quality of Governance

There is a lot of talk, particularly within Africa and in American universities, about the legacy of colonialism. That legacy is indeed baleful, but I have always found the argument that all of Africa's problems are a result of colonialism unconvincing. After all, South Korea's colonial experience was considerably more traumatic and unpleasant than that of, for example, Zimbabwe. Yet South Korea is now 30 times richer than Zimbabwe. Many Westerners emphasize the colonial legacy as the main source of Africa's problems in

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their long, often well-written, and very interesting books about the colonial period. It is almost as though the authors do not really want to find out what is going on in Africa today. Instead, they want to write about themselves and their own histories and thus get a pleasant feeling of moral superiority from flagellating their own nation.

I think the most important thing holding Africa back is the abysmal quality of governance there. What do I mean by that? A good government should seek to promote the prosperity of citizens by creating a framework within which ordinary people can pursue happiness and prosperity in whatever way they choose. Too often that is not the case in Africa. Too often you find that governments are predatory and incompetent.

Let me give one example. I once hitched a ride on a beer truck in Cameroon to investigate what it was like delivering beer to people in the hot Cameroonian rainforest. It was not a very long journey. It was equivalent to the distance from New York to Pittsburgh. According to our rather optimistic timetable, it was supposed to have taken us three-quarters of a day. In the event, it took us four days. Part of the reason was that the roads were so appalling. Clearly, someone had raided the road maintenance budget and the roads were completely unpaved. That would not have been a problem as long as it did not rain, but we were in a rainforest and so it rained often. There was also a bridge that collapsed because of poor maintenance. That meant that we had to make a bit of a detour. But the main problem was that we were stopped 47 times at police roadblocks.

West African roadblocks typically consist of a pile of oil drums in the middle of the road and maybe a piece of wood with nails sticking upwards, which a 10-year-old boy pulls aside once travelers are allowed to proceed. There is also typically a crowd

of policemen relaxing under the shade of a tree. The policemen get up and very leisurely inspect the axles and taillights. They also go through the driver's papers looking for every little problem. They then start the delicate process of negotiation about what you are going to do to make it up to them that you are breaking the law. We were delayed for between five minutes and four hours by each of those 47 roadblocks.

While on the road, I was trying to understand what was going on. The policeman at roadblock number 31 gave me what I thought was the most pithy explanation. He had not been able to find anything wrong and so he made up a rule about carrying passengers in beer trucks that, he insisted, we had broken. I said to him, "Look, this rule you are citing does not exist, does it?" He patted his holster and said, "Do you have a gun?" I said that I did not, to which he responded, "Well, I have a gun so I know the rules." I thought that was quite a good illustration of how "vampiric government," to use American University professor George Ayittey's phrase, works. The men with the guns are the men with the power to make the rules, and they use that power to extract rents from those who do not have power. That is the problem in Africa.

A Tale of Two Countries

As an example of how important governance is, take the cases of Botswana and Zimbabwe. Those two countries did not start off with a similar colonial legacy. Botswana had absolutely nothing at independence, whereas Zimbabwe had the second most sophisticated and diversified economy in sub-Saharan Africa. Since independence, Botswana has been governed sensibly, cautiously, and more or less honestly. The government has not spent money that it does not have. The government got quite a big windfall from the diamonds buried under the desert, and its politicians did not squander the money. They spent it cautiously on education, healthcare, and road building. Indeed, Botswana has had one of the fastest rates of per capita economic growth anywhere in the entire world. So Botswana's astounding success story over the past 35 years comes down to having an intelligent and honest president who does his own shopping down at the supermarket and carries the plastic bags himself.

In contrast, Zimbabwe has a president who looks at the most productive industry in his country—commercial farming—and smashes it, because the white farmers, who dominated it, supported the opposition party in the 2000 parliamentary election. Robert Mugabe and some of his apologists argue that he is correcting the legacy of colonialism—which, incidentally, he completely ignored during his first 20 years in power. Mugabe argues that he is merely redistributing land from the rich white people to the poor black people. But the last time I went to Zimbabwe, I visited a farm that had been taken over by an army brigadier. The brigadier did not seem terribly poor to me and was, in fact, one of Mugabe's wife's best friends. The brigadier had not bothered to plant anything, because he did not know anything about farming. But he had come up with a novel way of raising cash from his new asset. He went around to all the huts, where a large number of farm workers, who used to work for the former owner, lived. He kicked in the doors of those huts and stole the severance

packages that the white farmer had been obliged to pay all of his workers when he was kicked off his land.

The bottom line is that, since independence, Botswana has grown nine times richer than it was, while Zimbabwe has grown three times poorer. That 27-fold difference illustrates the contrast between bad governance and good governance. Could the situation in Zimbabwe get any worse? The answer is yes, it could. One of the worst things we see in too many African countries is that, when as a result of bad governance the state starts to atrophy, the people feel no reason to be loyal to it. In such circumstances, a country can very quickly descend into warfare. That is what we are seeing in the Ivory Coast at the moment. I do not normally believe in vicious circle theories, but poverty, stagnation, poor governance, and an overendowment of natural resources can increase the chances of a country going to war, which, in turn, tends to increase poverty.

Poverty, Stagnation, War, and Terrorism

Take Eastern Congo, for example. Last time I was there, I saw the effect that warfare has on the lives of individual people who are trying to make a living. Peasants in one village that I visited were too scared to stay in their own huts overnight, because the men with guns come in the night. So, they walk one and a half hours to the relative safety of the next garrison town every evening and walk back to their fields in the morning. Of course, people who do not have enough to eat in the first place and then have three hours of mountainous walking to add to their working day cannot possibly grow enough to eat. Those who stay behind in their huts have it even worse, however.

I spoke to one lady, who told me that she could not face the walk. She stayed in her hut, and the men with guns broke in during the night and forced her to carry everything—pots, pans, blankets, mattresses—away to their camp. Then, once they were there, they gang-raped her and broke a couple of her limbs. She somehow managed to escape back to her hut, where, two months later, another group of men with guns came in and gang-raped her again.

I would like to turn to the subject of terrorism. There is a theory going around that Africa ought to be a breeding ground for terrorism, because of the large number of Muslims who live there. If by terrorism we mean terrorism that affects the West, I do not believe that that is the case. There simply is not any significant homegrown international black African terrorist movement. People have many grievances, but they tend to be locally directed. If you actually ask people about President George Bush and the invasion of Iraq, average Africans will say that it was an appalling thing and that they dislike him very much. But George Bush's foreign policy is very low on their list of grievances. Their main grievances are the policemen who sit by the road robbing them every time they try to take their crops to market.

There is an interesting side story here—the small number of Africans who live in states where Muslims and Christians are fighting each other. The ones who feel they are oppressed by Muslims tend to like George Bush very much because of his perceived bashing of Muslims. A south-

ern Sudanese tribesman was interviewed by one of my correspondents. When he was asked what he thought of George Bush, he—bearing in mind the long history of northern Sudanese people dropping barrel bombs on his village—held up a pink Barbie doll and said: “This is a new wife for President Bush. May God grant him many fertile women with firm bodies and an election victory without problems in Florida.” An interesting take, I thought.

Reasons for Hope

There are several reasons for hope in Africa. One is that there are fewer wars now than there used to be. We have seen peace more or less achieved in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola, and in the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Even Congo is looking a little better than it did a year ago. On the other hand, we have not seen much progress in Sudan. What is going on in the Ivory Coast is completely terrifying and threatens to spread to the rest of the west African region, given how porous the borders are and how many young men there are for whom a rifle and an opportunity to loot villages seem like a good career option.

Another reason for being slightly optimistic about Africa is that it has grown more democratic since the end of the Cold War. Since the superpowers have stopped propping up appalling despots who were pro- or anti-Soviet and bankrolling appalling rebel armies for the same reasons, we have seen a flowering of elections. Of course, not all those elections have been great. You see many that are blatantly rigged. But if you want to take a crude measure of democracy—the ability to throw the bums out—you will observe that the situation has gotten a lot better.

In the 1960s and the 1970s in Africa, the total number of leaders who were peacefully voted out of office was zero. In the 1980s it went up to one—if you count Mauritius as a part of Africa. But then, in the 1990s, it was a dozen. That is a startling change. Of course, you do not always get a better government, but when you can vote rulers out, you at least get the accountability that comes from those rulers knowing that their people can get rid of them.

Democracy is not a panacea. Even when you have a

government in place that wants to make things better, you still have the difficulty of actually doing that. Nigeria, for example, has a new economic reform team. These very impressive, intelligent, and hard-working people are led by the finance minister, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala. She is a remarkable woman. She works until three in the morning. She actually queues in airports for her own place on an airplane, which is absolutely unheard of among Nigerian cabinet ministers. She has been working hard to make the public accounts more transparent and more rational in order to end the long culture of corruption that has held Nigeria back. Because of the widespread cynicism among the Nigerian electorate, however, very few people believe that it is possible to reform the system. They do not believe that they can ever have a clean government, and because they do not believe it, they think the rational thing to do is to try to get their own people into office—people from their own ethnic group or preferably their own family—and then try to get them to steal as much money as possible and distribute it among their kinfolk.

I was talking to one of the more pragmatic and honest regional governors in Nigeria, and I asked him how much pressure he was under to steal public funds. He picked up his mobile phone and he showed me a text message from one of his aunties. (The term “auntie” is used loosely in Nigeria.) It said, “Dear Donald, when would you like to see me so we can discuss the house problem?” His auntie, he explained, wanted him to buy her a house. I asked how many requests like that he gets, and he said he gets them “every minute of every day.” That is the kind of pressure he is under. I was talking to another regional governor, and I asked him what proportion of the Nigerian power elite he thought backed the reform drive and was in favor of rooting out corruption. “Perhaps five percent,” he said.

Now that is the scale of the task that lies ahead for those who would make Nigeria prosperous, and the task for the rest of Africa is similar, if less extreme. I think that in the end Africans will prosper, but they will not succeed by imagining that somebody else is going to solve their problems for them, that aid is a panacea, or that anyone other than Africans can make Africa rich.

Other Relevant Studies from the Cato Institute

“Underdevelopment in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of the Private Sector and Political Elites,” by Moeletsi Mbeki, *Cato Foreign Policy Analysis* no. 85, April 15, 2005.

“U.S. Policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa,” by Marian Tupy, in *Cato Handbook on Policy* (2005).

“South Africa’s War against Malaria: Lessons for the Developing World,” by Richard Tren and Roger Bate, *Cato Policy Analysis* no. 513, March 25, 2004.