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A Psychology of Democracy in Africa: From the Heart of Darkness?

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Title: A Psychology of Democracy in Africa: From the Heart of Darkness?

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Abstract. This article describes psychological phenomena affecting quests for international democratization.

These days, democracy seems the be-all and end-all of international politics, whether one believes in the end of ideology, the end of history, the end of the Cold War, or some beginning or ending leading to new beginnings and ends. How democratic is a nation-state? How democratic is it becoming? On what dimensions is a nation-state democratic or not? How slowly or quickly is democracy being approached or avoided? The meaning of such questions and answers to them may significantly bear on potentialities for war, peace, aid, trade, competition, cooperation, or isolation.

But explicit criteria for identifying democracy may be as lacking as those for pornography. Even the operational definition of knowing it when one sees it is virtually dependent on which eyes have the view.

What matters in democracy? Although size may not often matter, to some observers it's governmental structure--perhaps one comprising executive, legislative, and judicial branches. To others, it's process within structure--perhaps the independence or interdependence of the branches--or the structure's function--the responsibilities of the branches. To still others, it's electoral and other choice processes leading to membership in governmental branches. And to yet others, it's a frequency count for resonating phrases within speeches and documents--e.g., rule of law, civil and human rights, or the love and respect for freedom and equality and fraternity.

On the other hand, instead of governmental structure, process, and formal political verbiage per se, consequential, concurrent, or epiphenomenal descriptors of the citizenry may, in turn, be linked to the appropriateness of describing a political entity as a democracy. An example of the former may include material disparities between the highest and lowest percentile ranges of the enfranchised.

These abstract musings quickly become more concrete and practical in assessing reactions of political pundits, governmental and nongovernmental representatives, and other consumers of mass media products towards President Clinton's meeting with six East African leaders--from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Congo, and Ethiopia--during his recent African trip.

The six African leaders pledged to "pursue a dialogue on democratization....[that] recognizes there is no fixed model for democratic institutions....[and] explores alternative approaches to the democratic management of cultural diversity." Even President Clinton stated that "America knows....that there is no single blueprint for a successful democracy."

Reactions to the words of the African leaders and the United States President varied considerably. Frequently, there was a negative nexus: that advocating different approaches to democracy inexcusably provides support for one-party regimes, authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, dictatorships, the reification of collective rights over individual ones, permanent shortfalls in democracy, the transcending

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of material well-being over and instead of human rights--as if most of those who lack the most basic material sustenance possess the human dignity and will that partially constitute human rights--and even political activities perpetrated by those who only have sincere motive to perpetuate their own power. (In this nexus, there are intimations of the Asian models promulgated by leaders in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore before many Asian economies took a significant turn for the worse. As well, there are close approximations to the discounting of political violence and egregious human rights violations in Cambodia and the reification of the barest forms of democratic process in upcoming elections.)

Psychologically, however, what critics of African democratic trends seem to be doing is looking for their own images. As the Old Testament tells us that the Lord made man in his own image, so do critics of African democracy wittingly or unwittingly expect their own views, their own cultural practices, their own lives to be mirrored in those of the less fortunate, perhaps their less fortunate brethren. Is this in the spirit of altruism or from the heart of darkness? (See Heradstveit, D., & Bonham, G.M. (1996). Attribution theory and Arab images of the Gulf War. *Political Psychology*, 17, 271-292; McGraw, K.M., Fischle, M., Stenner, K., & Lodge, M. (1996). What's in a word? Bias in trait descriptions of political leaders. *Political Behavior*, 18, 263-287; McKinley, J.C. (March 26, 1998.) Six leaders in East Africa Agree to Build Democracies. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Waenke, M., & Wyer, R.S., Jr. (1996). Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22, 742-754; Wagner, W. (1995). Social representations, group affiliation, and projection: Knowing the limits of validity. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 25, 125-139.) (Keywords: Social Cognition, Typology.)