

The Struggle for Democracy

Issa Shivji, Dar-es-Salaam, 2003

The contemporary neo-liberal discourse has one fundamental blind spot. It treats the present as if the present has had no history. The discourse on democracy in Africa suffers from the same blindness. The struggle for democracy did not begin with the post-cold war introduction of multi-party system. The independence and liberation struggles for self-determination, beginning in the post-world war period, were eminently a struggle for democracy. Neither formal independence nor the victory of armed liberation movements marked the end of democratic struggles. They continued, albeit in different forms.

The struggle for democracy is primarily a political struggle on the form of governance, thus involving the reconstitution of the state. No one claims that democracy means and aims at social emancipation. Rather it is located on the terrain of political liberalism so, at best, creating conditions for the emancipatory project. This is important to emphasize in the light of the hegemony of neo-liberal discourse which tends to emasculate democracy of its social and historical dimensions and present it as an ultimate nirvana.

On these premises, although liberation was no doubt a democratic struggle, its articulation as a struggle for liberation gave democracy a social dimension, which the neo-liberal ideology eschews and avoids. In turn, the tension between political democracy and social emancipation constantly beleaguered the liberation and independence movements. This tension inevitably got enmeshed in the cold-war ideological confrontation between the two power blocks under respective superpowers. The cold war confrontation not only “disfigured” the liberation and democratic discourse in Africa, it turned the newly and fledging independent states into pawns, and the continent into a chessboard, of proxy hot wars. The consequences of those hot wars have been devastating for the continent. Today’s failed states were once upon a time the darlings or demons – depending on the point of view you take – of global hegemonic powers.

Military coups became the order of the day in the ‘60s and ‘70s. The targets were nationalist regimes, which wanted to carve out an independent space and give their sovereignty a modicum of reality. Patrice Lumumba was assassinated by the

American and Belgium manipulation and involvement (Blum 1986, 174). A surrogate regime of Mobutu was put in place.

The Congo, and its people, including, neighboring states in Central Africa have since seen no peace. Kwame Nkrumah, who early realized the importance of continental unity and the curse of imperial exploitation through multinationals, was overthrown in a CIA engineered coup (ibid., 223). That country too has not totally regained stability and development since.

Between January 1956 and the end of 1985 there were sixty successful coups in Africa, that is, an average of two every year (Hutchful 1991, 183). In 1966 alone there were eight military coup d'état and by 1986, out of some 50 African states, only 18 were under civilian rule (Nyong'o 1998, 78). Behind virtually every coup was the hand of one or the other imperial power, and, more often than not, the US. Overthrowing nationalist regimes and installing tyrannical dictatorships was, then, a "fair game" for today's champions of democracy and "good governance"!

The regimes, which for various reasons, escaped the fate of military take-over inevitably turned authoritarian one-party states under some or the other form of developmentalist rhetoric (see, generally, Shivji 1986). The one-party rule and curbing of individual freedoms was presented as a trade-off between democracy and development. Even that trade-off did not work. Unlike a Cuba in the socialist sphere or a South Korea in the capitalist sphere, none of the African states was able to wrench itself free of the neo-colonial economic structures imposed by colonialism and perpetuated by the imperial world market.

By the end of 1970s, many African states, regardless of the nature of their states or their economic policies or ideological orientation, found themselves in deep economic crisis with high debts, low or negative growth rates, hyper inflation and massive transfers of surpluses through various ways, to the developed North.

Meanwhile, the North, the US and Europe, was smarting under Reaganite and Thatcherite economics and politics (see Hobsbawm 1994, ch. 8). The general swing towards the right gripped even the social democratic northern Europe. The humiliating defeat in Vietnam, the newly-found power of the oil-producing countries in OPEC and the 1979 Iranian revolution dealt a heavy body blow to the hegemony of imperialism, in particular to the United States. Thus the Second Cold War in which the Reagan-Thatcher neo-liberal axis not only further fuelled the fires of ideological warriorism but also rabid anti-Third Worldism, which was directed equally against nationalist and self-identified socialist regimes (Hobsbawm ibid., 247 et. seq.) .The combination of economic crisis at home and the rise of neo-liberalism globally made many an African country a ready victim of the IMF-World Bank

structural adjustment programmes or SAPs. SAP came with its stringent conditionalities – liberalization of markets, balancing of budgets, removal of subsidies, so-called cost-sharing in the provision of social services, etc.. African states, including the most nationalist among them like Tanzania, were in no position to resist. They eventually gave in, wreaking havoc in the already fragile economies on the one hand, and the welfare of the most disadvantaged of their people, on the other (Mwanza ed., 1992). Import-substitution industrialization, which had been one of the developmental planks of the nationalist period, was virtually wiped out as industry after industry was bankrupted, unable to withstand the imports of cheap goods. Agriculture stagnated. There was little the governments could do beyond exhorting the peasants to work harder. Social indicators like education, health, water and electricity began to decline. In short, SAPs sapped whatever vitality there was in the fragile African economies (see, generally, Gibbon ed. 1993, Mongula 1994, Mamdani 1994). Even the moderate social achievements of the nationalist period in education, health, and water. were swept away.

The fall of the Berlin Wall, followed by the first Gulf War, marked another phase in the political come-back of imperial hegemony, or, what Furedi has called, the ‘moral rehabilitation of imperialism’ (Furedi 1994). If in SAPs imperial powers and the IFIs had flexed and applied their economic muscles, in the post-cold war “democracy” crusade, they aggressively and uncompromisingly applied their political muscles. Political conditionalities were added to economic conditionalities, while economic conditionalities were upgraded to include privatization of not only parastatals but also services – water, electricity, communication, education, etc. Multi-party democracy, human rights, “good governance”, poverty reduction became the buzz words of the discourse, now renamed, “policy dialogues”.

Hegemonic ideologies and dominant elites were not without their critiques. Nationalism of the middle class which came to power on the morrow of independence was severely rebuked by Frantz Fanon (.1963). Fanon roared and young intellectuals echoed him all over the continent.

The national middle class which takes over power at the end of the colonial regime is an under-developed middle class. It has practically no economic power, and in any case it is in no way commensurate with the bourgeoisie of the mother country which it hopes to replace. (pp. 119-120)

It follows the Western bourgeoisie along its path of negation and decadence without ever having emulated it in its first stages of exploration and invention, stages which are an acquisition of that Western bourgeoisie whatever the circumstances. In its beginnings, the national bourgeoisie of the colonial countries identifies itself with the decadence of

the bourgeoisie of the West. We need not think that it is jumping ahead; it is in fact beginning at the end. It is already senile before it has come to know the petulance, the fearlessness or the will to succeed of youth.
(p.123)

Developmentalism, or, what was called socialism in some places, found its critiques in theories of dependency and underdevelopment. Samir Amin (1990), Walter Rodney (1972), the young intellectuals of the Dar Campus, all vigorously debated with the mainstream American paradigms of political science centering around modernization and nation-building (Cliffe and Saul eds., 1973). . Multi-party and liberal democracy immediately elicited even a more passionate search for 'real' democracy. A spate of publications in the 1980s on popular struggles and social movements countering top-down civil society approaches became popular for a while but was not sustained (Nyong'o ed. 1987). SAPs too were subjected to academic research and intellectual scrutiny, though, more often than not, by this time, home-grown critiques were beginning to wear thin (Mwanza ed., op.cit., 1992, Gibbon ed., op.cit.) . The neo-liberal discourse, if it deserves that respectability, appears much more dominant today. Consultancy, the so-called policy-dialogues, NGOs and "human rights" have sucked in radical intelligentsia giving charlatans and policy-advisers the intellectual field-day. But to the credit of African radicalism, the apparent 'intellectual' hegemony is more a pretence than a reality. A few critiques have continued to challenge it, albeit ignored, at worst, or acknowledged as tokens, at best.

But the matter of social change and transformation is not simply one of discourse. The struggle for democracy is ultimately rooted in the life-conditions of the people. In the debates of the 60s and 70s, radical political economy, with its concepts of class and modes of production, placed on the centre stage the real struggles of popular classes and oppressed masses, notwithstanding that it remained an elite, and very often an elitist project. People were posited as the agency and drivers of change, as opposed to the state. The neo-liberal discourse is bereft of any such theoretical rigour or political vision. Popular classes and masses have been turned into a helpless lump of poor waiting with bowls in their hand to receive "poverty reduction funds" while the so-called private sector is paraded as the 'locomotive' of development. Curiously, the dialectic opposite of 'the poor' is not 'the rich' but 'the donors'! The analytical question is not 'how-the- poor-became-poor and continue to be so', but rather 'how many are poor, moderately poor, very poor' and how long would it take to eradicate poverty? As I said before, the neo-liberal discourse is not only blind to history but utterly oblivious of agency of change. It is par excellence the ideology , nay, the propaganda of, for and by the vested interests of the status quo. And it is on this ahistorical and asocial terrain that the discourse on governance, (that is "good governance" and "bad governance") is constructed.

Theoretical Treatment of Governance

What is the conceptual status of 'good governance'? At the minimum, liberal and radical paradigms would agree that governance refers to the institutions and relations to do with political power: the way political power is exercised and legitimized. In other words, governance is constructed primarily on the terrain of power. Thus articulated, the values and principles by which governance would be judged and characterized relate to forms of governance, such as democratic governance or authoritarian governance or dictatorial governance. The "good governance" discourse, however, does not admit of the relationships of power. Rather it presents itself as a moral paradigm, distinguishing between the good, the bad and the evil. What is 'good' and 'bad' governance thus turns out to be a moral judgment, on the one hand, and relativist and subjectivist, on the other. The result, I want to suggest, is that 'good governance' has no conceptual or theoretical value in understanding a phenomenon with a view to change it. Rather, it is, at best, a propagandist tool easily manipulatable by whoever happens to wield power. And this is exactly how it has been deployed in the dominant, neo-liberal discourse.

One of the political conditionalities imposed on African governments by the IFIs and the "donor-community" is 'good governance'. This has become a flexible tool in the hands of global hegemonies to undermine the sovereignty of African nations and the struggle for democracy of the African people. For, the people are no longer the agency of change but rather the victims of "bad governance" to be delivered or redeemed by the erstwhile donor-community. The instrument of this deliverance is supposedly the policies and political conditions – multi-party, governance commissions – which must be put in place for a state to qualify to receive 'aid'. The recipients on their part 'reform' their governance structures, with aid and technical assistance from the same 'donor-community', to satisfy their, what these days are called, "partners". The example from my country, which is far more subtle, and relatively more independent in its relationship with 'partners', illustrates the point.

In Tanzania, we have first a ministry, headed by a full-fledged minister, of good governance. Then, through donor pressure, the Government was obliged to establish a Commission for Human Rights and Good Governance with aid from the Danish government. Among the first things was to build a gargantuan structure to house the Commission and establish the infrastructure at a cost of over 1.5 billion shs. (or roughly 1.5 million US\$). (The people of Tanzania would never know the exact amount nor the conditions of the contract. It is secret from them. The Danish people would perhaps be in a better position to know how their government promotes "good governance" in Tanzania.) Then another bureaucratic structure of

civil servants headed by seven commissioners is set up drawing usual salaries and numerous allowances.

Besides a minister of good governance and a commission, there was another 'benefit' the Government received as part of 'good governance' assistance. A couple of years ago, the distinguished Finnish diplomat, Martin Althassari, paid visits to Tanzania as an 'advisor to the President' on good governance, sponsored by the World Bank! Presumably, he made a report to the President (or the World Bank, who knows?) after consulting civil servants, a sprinkling of NGO representatives, academics, private sector etc., as is the consultants' custom these days. How this consultancy represents the struggle of the people of Tanzania to construct a democratic state and polity, I cannot tell. And this is because, we are not even sure if "good governance" means the same thing as democratic governance of, for and by the people of Tanzania! After all they were never consulted on the appointment of the advisor to their president!

What about the Commission for Human Rights and Good Governance?

The Commission, among other things, receives complaints about violation of human rights and abuse of power and investigates the same. This is precisely the kind of work supposed to be done by the mainstream judiciary and the former Permanent Commission of Inquiry. The Permanent Commission was set up in the middle sixties modeled on Scandinavian Ombudsman to inquire into abuse of power by state officials and report to the President. True, both the judiciary and the Permanent Commission had a lot of flaws. People have had lots of criticisms and grievances against these institutions and expressed them, whenever they got an opportunity, or, whenever, they could snatch such opportunities. Both institutions cried out for reforms. Both required the political vision, will and resources for reform based on the grievances of the people. If the reforms were internally generated and grounded in the struggle and demands of the people, they would have almost certainly taken a very different trajectory. For example, the judiciary, in particular the lower judiciary, could be improved significantly by directing resources to train judicial personnel, providing reasonable benefits to the staff, such as housing, transport etc., and by innovative structures to institutionalize people's participation in judicial processes. Yet, that is not how "good governance" reforms are conceived. Structures parallel to existing ones are put up as a result of donor-pressure. The desirability and viability of such structures is hardly assessed within the countries concerned. One of the effects of setting up such structures is to undermine time-tested traditional state structures. Worse, reforms from the top instigated by donor conditionalities undermine the right of the people themselves to struggle for and conceive their own institutional reforms and set their own priorities. Furthermore, needless to mention, such top-down reforms conceived, prioritised and financed by

the erstwhile IFIs and donors undermine the very basis of democratic governance, that is, accountability to the people. The “governors” are accountable to the “donors” and their consultants and advisors on “good governance” rather than the people. Where is then the so-called democracy, trumpeted so much, and in whose name, political power seeks legitimacy?

No wonder, in my own country, which perhaps is not the worst example in Africa of utter submission to hegemonic powers, the President cites the acclamation he receives from IFIs (not his own people) as an example of the success of his policies.

One cannot help being cynical about the whole good governance project. This is not to say that Tanzania, like many other African and non-African countries, including some in the North, do not require reform of their governance structure. But the point is what kind of reforms, in whose interest and conceived and implemented by whom. Democratic reforms, let it be said for the umpteenth time, is the prerogative of the people. It is the exercise of their sovereignty and their right to self-determination. That is what the struggle for independence and liberation was all about. It was the struggle of the African people to reclaim their humanity and dignity and the right to think for themselves and to chart their destiny. This was, and is, precisely the essence of anti-imperialist struggles. It follows, therefore, that economic and political conditionalities, including those on good governance, are an expression of the reassertion of imperial domination, however it may be labeled.

Alternative to Good Governance

What I have presented so far may sound conspiratorial and one-sided. I am not a believer in conspiracy theories. Nevertheless, it remains a historical and contemporary truism that global hegemonic power, or, imperialism, is an anti-thesis of democracy. Together with local reactionary classes and groups, imperial powers have played a major role in suppressing democratic struggles of the people (Shivji 2002a). Neo-liberal politics, thrust down the throats of African people, is a corollary of the economic policies of the Structural Adjustment Programmes based on the Washington Consensus, mindlessly propagated and imposed by the World Bank and IMF. SAPs have wreaked havoc in the third world, particularly African economies. Serious studies testify to this. I need not cite any suspect sources in support. Suffice to quote the former Chief Economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz:

The application of mistaken economic theories would not be such a problem if the end of first colonialism and then communism had not given the IMF and the World Bank the opportunity to greatly expand their respective original mandates, to vastly extend their reach. Today these institutions have become dominant players in the world economy. Not only countries seeking their help but also seeking their “seal of

approval” so that they can better access international capital must follow their economic prescriptions, prescriptions which reflect their free market ideologies and theories.

The result for many people has been poverty and for many countries social and political chaos. The IMF has made mistakes in all the areas it has been involved in: development, crisis management, and in countries making the transition from communism to capitalism. Structural adjustment programs did not bring sustained growth even to those, like Bolivia, that adhered to its strictures; in many countries excessive austerity stifled growth; ... (pp.17-18)

Such systemic failures can hardly be described as “mistakes”. Rather, as the author himself observes elsewhere, they are the result of the interests that drive these institutions: ‘... the policies of the international economic institutions are all too often closely aligned with the commercial and financial interests of those advanced industrial countries.’ (ibid., 19-20) So, ultimately, we are not dealing with mistaken policies or conspiracy, but rather with the systematic forces reflecting the unequal relationships of the global system.

I should perhaps also clarify another point. In spite of what looks like the omnipresent and omnipotent global power, neither the neo-liberal discourse nor the imperial domination have been accepted without intellectual and practical resistance of the people. While it is true that we are generally in the trough of the revolution, and democratic and national liberation struggles have been aborted and pre-empted, African intellectuals have continued to pose alternative discourses based on bottom-up struggles and aspirations of their people. Liberal politics have been countered by social democratic politics and democracy by ‘new democracy’. In a summing up of a debate on democracy, Archie Mafeje, chiding his fellow African intellectuals for parroting liberal democracy, succinctly observed:

Regarding the present conditions in Africa, this can refer only to two things: first, the extent to which the people’s will enters decisions which affect their life chances, and, second, the extent to which their means of livelihood are guaranteed. In political terms the first demand does not suggest capture of ‘state power’ by the people (workers and peasants) but it does imply ascendancy to state power by a national democratic alliance in which the popular classes hold the balance of power. The second demand implies equitable (not equal) distribution of resources. Neither liberal democracy, imposed ‘multi-partyism’ nor ‘market forces’ can guarantee these two conditions. It transpires, therefore, that the issue is neither liberal democracy nor ‘compradorial’ democracy but social democracy. (in Chole & Jibrin, eds. 1995, 26).

In an article written in the late 1990s, I argued that it was 'new democracy' that was on the African agenda (Shivji 2000). The three critical elements of new democracy are popular livelihoods, popular power and popular participation. The term popular is meant to convey three meanings.

First, popular is used in the sense of being anti-imperialist. This is well captured in the people's own perception of what is called Second Independence. Given the continued and even more blatant imperialist domination that I have described, the new democratic consensus cannot be constructed without addressing the issue of liberation from imperialism, which is the anti-thesis of both 'national' and 'democratic'. But at the same time the term 'popular' is used to transcend the limits of the term 'national'. It is meant to highlight the limits of the first (national) independence which took the form of anti-colonialism. The independence or first liberation consisted in constituting state sovereignty; the core of the second liberation consists in resolving the issue of people's sovereignty.

The second meaning in which popular is used refers to the social basis of the project. The social core of the new consensus has to be popular classes, i.e. a popular bloc of classes. While its exact composition will of course differ, in many African countries the land based producer classes and the urban poor together with lower middle classes would constitute the 'masses'. This is where, to use Lenin's phrase, 'serious politics begin' - 'not where there are thousands, but where there are millions' (quoted in Carr 1961, 50).

The third meaning that I attach to popular is in the sense of popular perceptions, custom, culture and consciousness. Custom and culture, not in the vulgar sense of atrophied or unchanging tradition but rather in the sense of a living terrain of struggles where the old and the new, the progressive and the reactionary, jostle and struggle to attain hegemony. Needless to say that culture and traditions constitute one of the most important ideological fronts (albeit neglected in our social science discourses). This is where, in the words of Raymond Williams, the dominant culture either tries to harmonize or demonize the cultures of resistance. (See also Wamba 1991)

Such alternative discourses and struggles of the people have no doubt been aborted and pre-empted by the neo-liberal rhetoric. This is only a passing phenomenon, though. So long as neo-liberal politics and economics are incapable of addressing the real life-conditions of the African people, they have little legitimacy. The "good governance" discourse thus turns out to be profoundly a discourse of domination rather than that of liberation and democracy.

Conclusion: The Intellectual Tasks Ahead

It is now time to conclude. In this, rather long-winded presentation, I have tried to argue that the great democratic struggles of the African people expressed in their independence and national liberation movements remain incomplete. The so-called democracy constructed on ahistorical and asocial paradigms of neo-liberalism are an expression of renewed imperial onslaught, which is profoundly anti-democratic. It may as well proclaim: "Democracy is dead. Long live democracy." The tasks of committed intellectuals is to recognize the new imperialism called globalization and articulate the ideologies of resistance expressed in popular struggles (see, Shivji 2002b). African intellectuals must join issue with neo-liberalists and expose the paucity of concepts like "good governance".

The post-cold war renewal of imperialism is even more ferocious than classical colonialism. It is led by a dangerous and unrestrained super-power undermining the very basis of democracy, the right of the peoples to self-determination, that is, their right to think for themselves. It is playing god by deciding for the rest of the world, what is good and what is evil, who is a friend and who is a foe, who are people and who are non-people.

Commending Tanzania for its new foreign policy based on 'economic diplomacy', the US Ambassador to the country patronizingly told the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs:

The liberation diplomacy of the past, when alliances with socialist nations were paramount and so-called Third World Solidarity dominated foreign policy, must give way to a more realistic approach to dealing with your true friends – those who are working to lift you into the 21st century where poverty is not acceptable and disease must be conquered. (The Guardian, 29th July, 2003)

Here is an imposed friendship! During the nationalist phase, propounding his non-aligned policy Nyerere could say, 'We shall not allow our friends to choose enemies for us'. The current African leaders dare not even whisper so. But no people can accept to live under bondage for ever. Empires have come and gone. This too will go. Thirty years ago, Mwalimu Nyerere, talking about apartheid South Africa said, and this remains a fitting reply to all arrogant super powers:

Humanity has already passed through many phases since man began his evolutionary journey. And nature shows us that not all life evolves in the same way. The chimpanzees - to whom once we were very near - got on to the wrong evolutionary path and they got stuck. And there were other species which became

extinct; their teeth were so big, or their bodies so heavy, that they could not adapt to changing circumstances and they died out.

I am convinced that, in the history of the human race, imperialists and racialists will also become extinct. They are now very powerful. But they are a very primitive animal. The only difference between them and these other extinct creatures is that their teeth and claws are more elaborate and cause much greater harm - we can see this even now in the terrible use of napalm in Vietnam. But failure to co-operate together is a mark of bestiality; it is not a characteristic of humanity.

Imperialists and racialists will go. Vorster, and all like him, will come to an end. Every racist in the world is an animal of some kind or the other, and all are kinds that have no future. Eventually they will become extinct.

Africa must refuse to be humiliated, exploited, and pushed around. And with the same determination we must refuse to humiliate, exploit, or push others around. We must act, not just say words. (Nyerere 1973, 371).

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