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Democracy at Bay: The Arab Spring and Sub-Saharan Africa

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A great pendulum shift has occurred in the geopolitics of the Middle East and North Africa, from repressive autocracies to political liberalization to violent conflict and civil war. Enormous financial resources and military weaponry are being poured into these theatres. It is not too soon to ask, as the United States prepares to strike against the Syrian government, whether the fragile democratic gains in Sub-Saharan Africa since 1990 can withstand the winds of change. Will governing systems in this region tilt further towards authoritarianism? What can be done to shore up resistance to further democratic retreat as security operations escalate?

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Political liberalization in Sub-Saharan Africa has significantly altered public life in many countries. One of the catalysts of this transformation, it should be remembered, were urban riots in Algeria in October 1988 that induced the ruling *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) to permit multiparty elections. The surprising success of the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) in local and parliamentary elections of 1989 and 1991 prompted the military to remove government leaders, suspend the FIS, and declare a state of emergency – all provoking a civil war that consumed over 100,000 lives.

Crawford Young's outstanding new book, *The Postcolonial State in Africa*, reminds us that an Algerian Awakening of 1988-1992 sprang from the same sources as the Arab Spring two decades later: street protests by a despairing population against "a sclerotic, clan-ridden, and self-serving military-led autocracy."[1] Even the role played by political Islam in channeling popular anger has been prominent in both cases. While North Africa and the rest of the Arab world have not had a sustainable breakthrough to democratic governance, the opposite has been the case in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. The experiences, to be certain, are not all positive. Recalcitrant governments have brutally blocked democratic progress as in Zimbabwe, or entrenched pseudo-democracy or illiberal democracy as in Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Uganda, and other countries.

Counting Ballots, Ghana, December 1992
Photo Credit: Anthony Allison

The capacity of political and civil society to defend the democratic gains of the 1990s has varied. An important barometer of resilience or weakness has been the fate of term limits in the new constitutions. They have survived efforts by heads of governments to repeal them, as in Malawi, Nigeria, and Zambia. In Benin, a struggle is currently underway by the Red Wednesday campaign to block President Boni Yayi's plan to remove such a limit. Sadly, for every African country that has beaten back these challenges, three have succumbed.[2]

The retreat of democracy in Africa has been shown by Freedom House to reflect a global trend. I have written about the factors and forces responsible for this outcome: the reconfiguration of power instead of democratic transformation; autocratic tendencies of post-liberation regimes; appeasing of aid donors by trading economic growth for political advance; attractiveness of the "East Asian model" propelled by China's dominant presence; and heightened concern for stability and security with the upsurge of jihadist Islam, transnational crime, and collapsed states.[3]

What effects could the demise of the Arab Spring, the Syrian war, and general turmoil in the

Middle East and North Africa have on Sub-Saharan Africa? How should democracy advocates in Africa and abroad respond? I will suggest ten areas in which scholars, policy analysts, and political and social activists can act pre-emptively. They reflect insights from my past and current work and that of other scholars and analysts.

1. *Liberation Technology*. The empowerment of African people through the wide availability of cellphones should be enhanced. Initiatives by Google, Facebook, and other corporations to expand access to the Internet should be encouraged. Most Africans still do not have such access.

2. *Combating Prebendalism*. It is increasingly recognized in Africa and elsewhere that the use of government offices by their occupants to serve themselves and their kin groups hinders development, state building, and democracy. Countries that achieved low corruption, such as the Nordics, did so through sustained and deliberate effort. A more systematic effort must be made to devise locally effective ways of combating prebendal practices that are replicated by one generation of public office holders after another, whatever the nature of the regime.[4]

3. *Discordant Development*. The growth spurt in much of sub-Saharan Africa can reinforce patterns of discordant development in which economic gains accrue largely to elites. Widening markets do not necessarily correct this tendency. John Page and others have written on how the current growth gains in Africa do not reflect structural transformation of economies, especially greater productivity and increased employment. Growth with Equity must also become more than a slogan. Conditional cash transfers and other innovative approaches to reduce inequities should be explored in Africa, especially in light of increased revenue income from oil and other mineral discoveries.[5]

4. *Developmental Governance*. Some African countries, and sub-national entities, are making progress in building administrative systems characterized by developmental governance. But many are not. External donors and local organizations should collaborate in distilling the lessons learned and promoting projects to implement them widely.[6]

5. *Prismatic Narratives*. Progress and disaster narratives generate confusion as to which prevails where and why. Security considerations can render an undemocratic regime, such as that of Chad, important for the restoration of democracy because of its military

capacity, as shown in the French-led campaign to push back Islamist militias in Mali. This observation applies equally to armed conflicts in the Great Lakes region and northeast Africa. Apart from the internal work of intelligence agencies, there are insufficient prismatic analyses of the complex geopolitics of many contested states and regions.[7]

6. *Islam and Democracy.* The demise of the Arab Spring is undermining hopes for a further demonstration that Islam is compatible with constitutional democracy. In Sub-Saharan Africa, this is an argument that needs no special pleading, as the cases of Senegal, Nigeria and other West African states have long demonstrated. It is also evident in democratic countries with smaller but significant Muslim populations such as South Africa and Tanzania. The sectarian battles in the Middle East should prompt an outreach by Islamic organizations in Africa and Asia on the embrace of constitutional and pluralist democracy by their societies.[8]

Checking Ballot Papers, Mrs. Rosalynn Carter
Zambia, October, 1991

7. *Defending Democracy.* One of the notable recent successes in Africa has been preventing the shift from democracy to authoritarianism in several countries – an

outcome of collaboration among national, regional, continental and international organizations as well as supportive actions by western nations. The beneficiaries of these developments include the citizens of Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, Niger, Senegal and Zambia. Will such determination slacken, especially if there is a decline in external support for democracy building in response to public fatigue over war and disorder? To counter such a trend, the important victories must be heralded.

8. *Post-liberation Regimes.* Among the strong states of Africa, a disproportionate number are led by regimes that came to power through armed struggle: Angola, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mozambique, Namibia, Rwanda, Uganda. In all of these, no alternation in the political party controlling the government has occurred, and none is likely to take place in the near future even where elections are permitted. How such regimes can evolve in a democratic manner, in an era in which priority is given to state capacity and political stability, is a question that should be addressed.[9]

9. *Societal Transformations.* Democratic transformations do not only occur at the level of governmental systems. Equally important are changes that take place within society and here the African story since 1990 is a largely positive one. Africa is a freer place and everywhere civil society in the form of women, youth, professional and other organizations – plus greatly expanded freedoms of the media and expression – reflect advances that are unlikely to be significantly threatened. They must, however, continually be strengthened and, where necessary, vigorous action taken to defend them.[10]

10. *Big States, Big Challenges.* There are no successful – that is peaceful, coherent, and democratic – big states in Africa.[11] The travails of Congo, Nigeria, and Sudan regularly provoke debates about their viability. South Sudan has been hived off from Sudan. Ethiopia, having lost Eritrea, has fashioned a governing system in which ethnic, regional and religious diversities are effectively managed by a militant post-liberation regime. I often cite Richard Sklar's notion that Africa is a "workshop of democracy".[12] This remains to be demonstrated in Africa's big states which must expand governmental authority while permitting citizens of culturally plural nations to exercise self-governance and self-expression.

To conclude: One response to the tragic turn of events in North Africa and the Middle East should be a new wave of analyses of democracy and state-building in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Some of the issues to be confronted have been suggested here. These analyses should identify the gains to be protected and deepen our understanding of almost a quarter-century of significant democratic progress. Lessons painfully learned in many countries could inspire and inform their northern neighbors as well as bolster efforts to advance what has been accomplished.

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1. See *The Postcolonial State in Africa: Fifty Years of Independence, 1960-2010* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), p. 202. ↩

2. Crawford Young calls attention to the importance of term limits, their retention or repeal, in *The Postcolonial State*, pp. 365-366. ↩

3. See "Democracy and Reconfigured Power in Africa*," Current History* (November, 2011); "Challenges of a Frontier Region", *Journal of Democracy* (April, 2008); "Africa: States in Crisis," *Journal of Democracy* (July, 2003); "Africa, 1990-1997: From *Abertura* to Closure," *Journal of Democracy* (April, 1998); and "Democratization in Africa after 1989: Comparative and Theoretical Perspectives," *Comparative Politics* (April, 1997). ↩

4. See https://africaplus.wordpress.com/2013/07/26/prebendalism-and-dysfunctionality-in-nigeria/ ↩

5. I first introduced the notion of discordant development in *Foresight Africa: Top Priorities for 2013*, http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2013/01/foresight-development-insecurity-joseph ↩

6. For a discussion of democratic and non-democratic developmental governance in contemporary Africa, see https://africaplus.wordpress.com/2013/08/04/is-good-governance-necessary-for-economic-progress-in-africa/ ↩

7. For a discussion of progress, disaster, and prismatic narratives, see the three-part series, "Strategic Priorities in Contemporary Africa", in www.africaplus.wordpress.com, (March-May 2012). ↩

8. An important volume of essays on this topic is Benjamin F. Soares and René Otayek, *Islam and Muslim Politics in Africa* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) ↩

9. It is striking how many analyses of African politics fail to call attention to the important difference in the nature of African regimes that came to power, and entrenched themselves, through armed struggle and military capacity. ↩

10. Even where great transformations of a democratic nature have taken place, as in Liberia, the freedoms enjoyed could still be precarious. See Rodney Sieh, "Jailed for Journalism",

The New York Times (August 31, 13). ↩

11. For an important essay on this topic, see Marina Ottaway, Jeffrey Herbst, and Greg Mills, "Africa's Big States: Toward a New Realism," http://carnegieendowment.org/pdf/files/PolicyOutlookOttaway.pdf. The authors describe South Africa as "the only successful big state in Africa". I do not include it with the others because, as a post-apartheid state, South Africa is *sui generis* with a quite unique state building experience. ↩

12. "Democracy in Africa," *African Studies Review* (September-December 1983). ↩

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