

About Strongmen and Strong Institutions in Africa: Wade, Compaoré and Mugabe's Administrations In The Light Of Mandela's Achievements

Oladjidé A. Moutinou Soumanou

(PhD, Ecole Doctorale Pluridisciplinaire Espaces, Cultures et Développement, FLASH / Abomey-Calavi University, Benin Republic), Laboratoire du GRAD (UAC, Bénin)
Corresponding Author: Oladjidé A. Moutinou Soumanou

ABSTRACT: One of the reasons for the almost permanent underdevelopment status of the African continent is the weakness of the political institutions in its different countries. The situation is also worsened by the bad management from its leaders, and its head of states mainly. Corruption and bad governance yield dictatorship and tyranny. In his lifetime, Nelson Mandela was praised and referred to as a good example of democrat, visionary and political leader to follow. He enjoyed respect and reverence by his peers all over the world and by his African fellows in particular. However, the latter fail to imitate him, rather preferring to maintain themselves in power, while their populations ask for more democracy and significant change in the political management of the affairs of their respective countries. Presidents Compaoré, Wade and Mugabe's political administrations and era are but a sample, yet a representative one of the counter examples which they constituted for the advancement of their respective countries and of the continent as a whole.

KEYWORDS: African Heads of States, bad governance, dictatorship, strongmen, strong institutions.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Africa appears as the most partitioned unit among the seven continents (when considering South and North America as two distinct space continents)¹. With up to fifty-four territories, the cradle of humanity is currently an assembling of spacemicro and fragile states, occupying a total surface area of 30,370,000 square kilometers of the world landmasses. The continent ranks second in terms of size and world population, just behind Asia. More than half of the continent's population is young, with a lot of potentialities in terms of natural resources and development opportunities.

The figures cited above are very interesting and even impressive. Yet, there is no need to attempt any demonstration on the vulnerability of the whole continent, provoked by the instability of the micro states towards external powers. This vulnerability of the African continent encompasses several aspects. They range from the population's overall insecurity from one corner to the other: (land and military insecurity, food insecurity, inadequate healthcare system, bad resources planning and management), political unrest over the continent, etc. The latter generates social tensions in the populations (economic instability, bad governance, large scale corruption, post electoral conflict, etc.). The only few assets mentioned here should normally constitute a real impact stimulant for the stability and development of the continent at all levels. However, from Alger in the north to the Cape in the south, and from west to east, the continent is continuously undermined by a plague which seems to be continuously resisting generations despite some faint and rare good examples. The common origin of the African continent's bad condition seems to be the bad political administration/ governance by the various head of its different States. In almost all of the fifty-four African states, the colonial administration has passed the political power and administration management to autochthonous long time ago. Whether the independence granted (or acquired) for almost half a century now by the majority of those African countries was a fake one, or whether the colonizer continues to exploit or has a direct influence on the management and governance of their once colonies, that is another concern. The real matter currently is about the Africans leaders themselves in their (in) ability to keep their promises, to abide by the land law of their countries, and be guided by the wellbeing of their compatriots.

Feeling very concerned as an African by origin, and reflecting on that sad condition of the African continent, the former US President Obama never missed any opportunity to urge African heads of states to

¹"F-10 Curriculum Geograph". Australian Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Authority.

respect the constitutions of their respective countries. He said this already upon his first official visit to Africa as the US President (Ghana, 2009) and repeated it again during the *U.S-Africa Summit* (Washington, 2014). He then declared: "...Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions"².

"*Who the cap fit should wear it!*" says the popular wisdom. Indeed, no sooner had Obama delivered his rhetoric than those who found themselves in an uncomfortable position with such a speech, responded back. Through an interview to the international media, the former President of Burkina Faso fiercely attacked Obama's assertion, pretending there are no strong institutions without strong men...

This paper aims to focus on only two additional examples apart from the above stated case (Senegal and Zimbabwe). And as a rare exception over the continent, I decide to make a comparison between those three cases and the "Mandela" South Africa.

In Senegal for example, the population manifested a sharp opposition to democratically elected president Wade who was progressively turning to dictatorship, by trying to sit for a hypothetical third term of presidency. In Zimbabwe, south of the continent and a border country to South Africa, the population visibly got tired of enduring an almost life presidency decreed by the veteran Mugabe. However, as he was unwilling to quit things while it was still time, he was shamefully deposed at the time he expected it the least, by his close companions.

On the contrary, in South Africa and despite the tragic history of the apartheid era endured by the populations, the country somehow showed a good example of (multiracial) democratic apprenticeship, under Mandela's term of administration. Moreover, the latter resisted the temptation of the political power and preferred retiring after a unique five-year term of presidency. Both his political party and his achievements survived him, after his departure. And even though the African National Congress is having an internal crisis, the vitality of democracy within the party itself and in the country through the independence and good functioning of the institutions remains a reality.

II. METHODOLOGY

Rather than a mere chronological relation of historical facts, this paper is actually and basically a comparative study of systems which prevailed in different places, and at different moments in the course of history. I have thus used different but complementary approaches in conducting my analyses. Dealing with historical facts, I have used the documentary analysis approach. The data and information collected from books, magazines and other sources, some online, and some from the mass media in general, have been processed to accommodate this approach. Furthermore, the diversity of sources and the cross checking of information have also helped in the formulation and building of arguments to verify or contradict the main ideas underlying this comparative study.

This work is also written from a qualitative perspective. The valuing and spotlighting of Mandela's achievements may seem a little bit exaggerated. However, my intention has never been to fall in a hollow extolling of a character of flesh and bone. Rather than overly focusing on a man and his deeds, I'm mainly concerned with putting forth the achievements and good examples of this former freedom fighter, leader and head of State during and after his administration, as opposed to Wade, Compaoré, Mugabe and many others who despite their ages, demonstrated an unfading attachment to power during their different tenures, while revering Mandela at the same time.

III. PRESIDENT WADE: FROM HOPE TO DISILLUSION

In the year 2000, Abdoulaye Wade started to serve his country as the first democratically elected president of Senegal. Until then, the man unsuccessfully ran for presidential elections for several years. Indeed he eventually spent more than thirty years in quest of the universal suffrage from his compatriots for the presidency of Senegal. Upon achieving his dream eventually in the year 2000, Wade (aged 74 at the time) incarnated a real alternative for a democratic change in a forty-year led Senegal by Presidents Senghor and Diouf since the independence of the country in 1960. As a candidate, Wade even promised his compatriots who urged him to sit for the 2000's presidential election that, owing to his age, he would be satisfied with only one-term if he were elected. He eventually succeeded in being elected. However, Not only he did not keep his promise (he completed more than one term), he also attempted to cling to power after his first and second terms of presidency.

Once in power, President Wade took advantage on the popularity of his party and the majority which they subsequently won in the parliament and this enabled him to engage a major constitutional reform one year later. Senegal adopted a new constitution on 22 January, 2001. The main lines of the new law stipulated that the president would henceforth be elected for a five-year term and not seven years anymore, as it was then. The

² Excerpt from Obama's speech at the Ghanaian parliament on 11 July, 2009

number of mandates would be limited to two. Achieving such a reform was salutary and at the same time this *space* was an improvement in the democratic culture of the country too. As a matter of consequence, President Wade bound himself to be the last Senegalese president with a seven-year term. In 2007, he was re-elected and should normally quit the power, no matter what situation, five years later, as stipulated in the 2001's constitution. But all of a sudden, this evidence became too easy to say than to implement by the man himself, who advocated for this reform only a few years ago. Roughly one year after his re-election, he once again got the constitution modified, returning back to the previously abandoned seven-year term for the president of the Republic. The worst of it came a few years later, when in an interview he gave in 2011 he said the following: "My quitting [the power] would generate a chaos even worse than the Cote d'Ivoire's case. For now, there is no credible person to replace me"³.

How come that a president being elected according to a constitution, and who was even at the basis of the improvement of the law, dare to come back on his feet again and say such a thing that his departure would lead his country in chaos? This simply poses the problem of commitment of the leaders and their appropriation of the laws. This unwillingness to quit the power after his constitutional term made President Wade to attempt another modification of the land law. That nascent power confiscation provoked a violent uprising of the population in June 2011 and forced the "hanging" president to officially renounce to his project. But at the same time, he managed to get his candidacy validated for the 2012's presidential election by the Constitutional Council.

As a consequence of the above stated manipulations by President Wade in his stubbornness to maintain himself in power, the year 2012 recorded a wave of social and *space* political tensions over the country.

IV. COMPAORÉ-THE ALLEGED BUILDER OF STRONG INSTITUTIONS

In Burkina Faso, the situation was different from the Senegalese case; but it also had to do with the former president's (I will call him Mr. Strongman) unwillingness to quit power, even after twenty-seven years of service.

As previously mentioned in the introduction, it seemed the downfall of Mr. Strongman was struck by Obama's remarks. In fact, during the August 2014 U.S-Africa Summit held in Washington, the former US president, as if preventing an event that would inevitably happen, repeated to African Heads of States to respect the constitutions of their respective countries. It was actually a reminder from him. Indeed, on the occasion of his visit to Ghana in 2009, upon his first official visit to Africa, Obama declared before the Ghanaian parliament: *space* "No person wants to live in a society where the rule of law gives way to the rule of brutality and bribery. That is not democracy; that is tyranny, and now is the time for it to end. Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions"⁴.

But this renewed warning from Obama to the African Heads of States lit a wave of press reactions, especially from the African Head of States. Those who found themselves in an uncomfortable position with such a lesson, or who were still willing to play an additional time in power despite the prescriptions of their constitution responded back. Through an interview to the international media, President Compaoré attacked Obama's assertion as follows: "There is no unique experience to share globally at the world level (...); there are no strong institutions without strong men that can lay the foundations of those institutions through time. I think that each country must forge its own process to reach its ideal in stability"⁵.

May be Compaoré was not totally wrong. However, such a reaction calls on some reflections: how long should it take Mr. "strongman" to lay the basis of strong institutions in his country? Are we still in democracy when a politician let his militants say he is the only one capable of providing for the welfare of everybody, all the time? Mr. Strongman continuously modified the constitution of his country and multiplied his years of stay in power and eventually upset the whole country. When the situation became unbearable he had to run away from his country like a mere fugitive, leaving a chaotic atmosphere behind him. Mr. Strongman was so strong that he could not help changing his nationality for fear of being prosecuted for the many accusations of political assassinations attributed to him and his dictatorial regime which lasted up to twenty-seven years.

V. VETERAN MUGABE AND HIS UNGRACEFUL WILLING

Last but not least in the strongmen's series, let's examine the situation in Zimbabwe, a next door country to South Africa!

³An excerpt from Abdoulaye Wade's interview with LAURENT LARCHER (*La Croix*, 22 Juillet 2011). My own translation.

⁴ Excerpt from Obama's speech at the Ghanaian parliament on 11 July, 2009

⁵ Excerpt from President Blaise Compaoré's statement to TV5, France24 and BBC on 5 August 2014 in Washington (my own translation).

On the occasion of Nelson Mandela's funeral which he attended despite the known rivalry between the two personalities, Mugabe the Zimbabwean President allegedly announced that he would also like the people of Africa to treat and remember him as they did for Mandela on the day of his death. And Morgan Tsvangirai, his renowned political opponent ironically answered him back that he should first of all start with twenty-seven years in prison for such a wish to be accepted and fulfilled.

There are very similar points of resemblance between Mandela and Mugabe. The least that can be said about the two figures is that their countries had undergone the same white minority rule over the black majority population; their militant activism prompted them to the front of the struggle; they had known the prison for their commitment to the liberation of their peoples and eventually came out as heroes of the guerilla wars which they both had to fight for the independence of their respective countries. In 1979, the end of the war of independence championed Mugabe as the hero and one year later, he won the general elections in South Rhodesia (present day Zimbabwe) and was inaugurated as Prime Minister of the newly independent country. Mugabe has remained in power ever since, strengthening his position as the head of the nation, and crushing any attempt of opposition to his power. Mugabe was inaugurated as the president of Zimbabwe in 1987 and was enjoying a somehow legitimate popularity in his country and even outside while Mandela was still imprisoned. But as soon as the situation changed sides in the neighboring South Africa with Mandela's release from prison, the world turned its eyes to the iconic hero who had just spent twenty-seven long years behind the bars, a time period more than two times the length of Mugabe's stay in prison.

It is understandable that Mugabe feels a bit jealous of Mandela's grown and unfading popularity since then and even after his departure. But it seems evident that if the Zimbabwean veteran and hero of the war of independence failed short to keep unchanged the esteem of his people, he could blame nobody but himself and his steady non-satiated thirst for power. Since the independence of the country in 1980 he had been on the control of the state power. Shifting from Prime Minister to President in 1987, Mugabe was re-elected time and again (1990, 1996, 2002, 2008 and 2013). After more than thirty years in power, veteran Mugabe (then aged 90) still wanted more, while "the Man" whom he likes to be equally compared to had just contented with only one term in power.

His last and fateful attempt was in 2017, when he maneuvered to castaway Emmerson Mnangagwa, his deputy president and old companion, to the benefit of his wife Grace, as his future successor at the head of the country. The story of November 2017 tells us Grace Mugabe brought no grace to her husband. As I put it in *onespacearticle* which I published recently, I asserted that the Zimbabwean strongman's apparently unpredicted downfall could find its reasons in "Mugabe's own posture; an attitude which progressively eroded his own margin of certainty... His wife Grace's presidential ambitions to take over from her husband eventually showed to be an ungraceful act for both of them"⁶.

VI. DISCUSSION: CONTRASTS AND SIMILARITIES

After telling the above "stories" on African strongmen and their power management, now is the moment to draw some common points and some differences between each one of them and the man they intentionally liked being compared to, at least theoretically and in terms of prestige.

VI.1 Disenchantment with Wade

When putting side by side President Wade's achievements with those of Mandela, I have noticed the following points:

- 1- Mandela and the ANC came to power in 1994; that is forty-six years after the 1948's elections which brought the apartheid regime to power; he was 76.
- 2- In 2000, President Wade inaugurated the startup of multiparty democracy in Senegal, forty years after the country's independence. He was 74 at the time.
- 3- There were some similarities between the two men, in terms of their political commitment and struggle for equity and inclusive democracy, even though the social backgrounds in the two countries were not the same.
- 4- The shadow in Wade's trajectory was his second term in 2012, and his will to maintain himself in power after that term, and despite his declining age.

Contrary to Wade, Mandela contended himself with only one tenure, allowing the ANC his political party to democratically entitle another candidate for presidency. President Wade lacked elegance and this tarnished his politically image, failing to be regarded as the "West African Nelson Mandela".

VI.2 Compaoré and Mugabe: so many years for what?

⁶ Oladjidé Moutinou Soumanou "Mandela and Mugabe: Service vs Power", *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, vol. 23 no. 05, 2018, pp. 51-54

There is a striking contrast between Mugabe, Compaoré and Mandela, though with little similarities:

- 1- Mugabe acceded to the top position of his country, firstly as the Prime Minister of his newly independent country in 1980. He had been in control of power ever since. Shifting from Prime Minister in 1980 to Presidency seven years later, Mugabe was re-elected until 2013 and served up to 2017. After nearly four decades in power, Mugabe was unwilling to leave, while "the Man" in the next door country, whom he constantly demanded to be equally compared to, *space*served for a five-year term only.
- 2- Compaoré came to power after a coup in 1987. Until November 2014 when he was deposed after a nationwide uprising in Burkina-Faso, Mr. Strongman too would have spent the number of years as above: twenty-seven; but for what? Not in prison anyway; he was allegedly building "strong institutions" still then! And he was ironically well rewarded, as the population got rid of him evenly.
- 3- Mandela's political commitments brought him to prison and he started serving his long years in prison around 1964. He was only liberated twenty-seven years later. Mandela triumphantly gained freedom and few years later he served his country at the top position, with wisdom and humility.
- 4- When regarding the facts above, it can be said Compaoré's twenty-seven years were like a waste of time for the population, while Mandela's twenty-seven years in prison helped in the liberation of the South African people.
- 5- As for Mugabe's thirty-seven years in power, his somehow rapid and easy downfall showed clearly that he *space*missed to prepare his stepping down before his compatriots got exasperated by his long stay in power. He forgot to quit power and enjoy a deserved retirement, without the army having to force him really. He even forgot to learn from Compaoré's fate, who like him, was eventually deposed in November too.

VII. CONCLUSION

I have been telling stories which occurred in different countries over the continent. These stories, though taking place in different settings had a few things in common: the power management by African leaders and Head of States. The three main characters which I talked about are but a sample, yet a representative image of how most of the African Presidents behave once in power. In their majority, they all revered Mandela as a liberation fighter in his country, and also as an example to follow *space*concerning his *space*dispassion vis-à-vis the power. Almost all of them never failed to cite him or try to identify themselves to his destiny whenever circumstances enabled them to do so. The whole world gathered in South Africa in December 2013 on his funerals, testifying once again the popularity of the man. But why on earth our African head of States cannot attempt to take example on Mandela and built upon his legacy? Though each people has *space*their *space*own story and historical trajectories, it is also true that there are values which are universally recognized; and this is particularly true with Mandela's legacy to Africa and to the world in general.

President Wade had this unique opportunity to become the "West African Mandela in his country"; but he failed to enter the ages! As for Compaoré *space*and *space*Mugabe, their long stay in power completely eroded their capacities to objectively assess the true aspirations of their respective populations. *space*Failing to rise to the stature of a good leadership for the welfare of their peoples, failing to copy the Mandela model of leadership, they preferred power to *space*service. *space*Mandela's example explicitly showed and continues to testify that institutions become solid and stronger when respected and given their due power by those who rule over them. This seems the prime pre requisite for a better political management of a country. And for those who thought about it the other way round, *space*the history's *space*lesson taught them bitterly that it is pretty better quitting things before things quit you!

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