

Reflections on African Liberation Movements

The term 'liberation movement' has been part of the political lexicon in Africa since the emergence of organised groups, usually armed, to free African countries or societies from the yoke of colonial rule. Interestingly, those that sought to achieve independence through peaceful means never qualified for the label. Instead, they became 'independence movements'. Liberation movements usually sprang up in countries where the colonial powers were so determined to frustrate calls for independence that they could kill to preserve the status quo. In the end, they lost, which was inevitable. Those fighting for freedom were always destined to win. These first-generation independence warriors or liberators made such extravagant promises that in the end, they were generally eventually unable to deliver.

In some instances, they turned out to be just as oppressive and, in some instances, more detached from the lives of ordinary people than their colonial-era predecessors had been. They had inherited systems which they had fought hard to topple and change, only for them to now find them useful as tools of repression and oppression. With time other groups emerged, whose declared objectives were the liberation of fellow citizens from the new oppressors. They too promised democracy and respect for civil liberties. These second-generation movements made promises that mirrored those made previously by the very leaders whom they had emerged to fight and remove from power. Promises of democracy and freedom earned the new groups the support of fellow citizens for whom oppression had become the normal order of things under the leaders who had liberated them from colonial domination.

One thing is certain: liberation movements have tended to fall short of achieving the ambitious objectives that they set for

themselves. The goals have included: democratisation of politics and respect for civil liberties; fighting disease, poverty, and ignorance, which meant building functioning health and education systems and promoting prosperity; promoting national unity and ending all forms of marginalisation; and recalibrating relations with external actors, particularly former colonial rulers.

Failure to achieve many or all of these objectives has usually stemmed from liberation movements having not dedicated ample time or any time at all to setting out how they were going to be pursued and achieved. Those that have achieved success or significant success are usually those which have taken seriously the tasks of defining and laying out their short- and long-term objectives and how to pursue and achieve them. Two salutary examples of liberation movements that failed to define and lay out their historical missions and build consensus around them, and then pursue them with consistency and commitment, include the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement (SPLM), and the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (ADFL), which ousted Mobutu Sese Seko from power in the then Zaire.

Another key failure of liberation movements has been to not work out post-war reconstruction strategies that included as many of their key potential adversaries as possible in decision making. Deciding what is important and what therefore should be pursued with a sense of urgency, and also what is not important, which could be pursued later, is critical. This ensures that the new elites in charge of the state remain focused on working together in pursuit of shared goals and that they are not distracted by short-term, unprincipled, and narrowly-focused contestations for power by competing factions.

Three examples of liberation movements that have been rather successful in these respects, admittedly to varying degrees, are the usually maligned Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the

Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF, now PFDJ), and the now beleaguered Tigrayan Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF). Post-war, and again to varying degrees of consistency and success, all three movements set out to focus on the plight of the ordinary person plagued by poverty, disease, and ignorance and do what was necessary to address this triple challenge. Tufts University scholar Alex de Waal has written compellingly about the amount of time the TPLF/EPRDF spent, during the war of liberation, on discussing the issue of how to tackle poverty among the peasantry in Ethiopia. There is also some evidence that both the EPLF and the RPF spent time examining what needed to be done to achieve prosperity and social justice for all. They have not achieved roaring success by way of eliminating poverty. However, in terms of remaining focused on the issue and lifting large numbers of people out of poverty, all three movements have been successful.

Clearly, on the issue of national unity, there are strong indications now, that the TPLF/EPRDF's solution of choice, ethnic federalism, could have been a mistake. For the RPF and the EPLF/PFDJ, however, there is ample evidence that much progress has been made, with lots of room left for more. Three decades down the road for one (PFDJ) and almost 3 decades on for the other (RPF) both movements continue to hold their respective countries together amidst greater internal unity than was the case prior to their ascendance to power. For the EPLF/PFDJ, decisive military triumph over its rivals and its subsequent enjoyment of total dominance has been an important factor preventing disruptions to unity and stability which in other countries spring from elite fragmentation. The RPF has achieved remarkable success at selling its vision to political groups which, under a conventional multi-party system, would have been actively seeking to replace it at the helm. Today, thanks to a post-war political system built on a consensus about what kind of country Rwanda should become, Rwanda is more united and significantly insulated against internally-generated upheaval, thanks to inclusion, than it ever was

during its first 30 years of independence.

In terms of recalibrating relationships with former colonial powers and dominant actors on the international scene, again the three movements have achieved varying degrees of successes. In Eritrea, the PFDJ has been uncompromising, some would say to the extreme, in its pursuit of self-reliance and autonomy in decision-making. EPRDF/TPLF-led Ethiopia was just as uncompromising on matters of national sovereignty and interest, asserting its right to make its own choices. For the RPF, the pursuit of self-reliance for Rwanda is a major principle and a central plank in its ideological positioning. Like the PFDJ and the EPRDF, securing policy space from outsiders that seek to push this or that idea or agenda is a key imperative. If in power all the three movements have presided over governments that strike observers as unusually militant, uncompromising, and aggressive, it is because they have shown the unusual quality of not acting like others elsewhere that shrink before challenges, wherever they may come from.

And for this success, all three have paid a heavy price. They have had to weather unrelenting criticism, demonisation, and harassment by media, academia, human rights groups, and Western governments, on account of failure to measure up to 'international standards' in matters of politics, governance, and human rights. Here Eritrea is something of an outlier, having not held elections or changed leadership for the entire 30-years of its independence. Many claims are made by observers in trying to explain why this is. Internal challenges have combined with externally-generated existential threats to give the PFDJ sufficient grounds to not hold elections and risk destabilisation in a country which, for many years, has been under siege, buffeted by politically-motivated international sanctions and political and diplomatic pressures by regime-change-seeking forces. It would be easy for critics and sceptics to dismiss these arguments. What

cannot be easily dismissed is that we shall never know what would have happened in the absence of external pressures and challenges.

Both Rwanda and Ethiopia have held multiple elections since the RPF and EPRDF took over power. However, they have been deemed to not measure up to the standards set by 'the international community' in terms of how free or fair, or transparent they have been. Consequently, each country, not unlike Eritrea, has been landed with the 'dictatorship' label, and their governments or leaders 'authoritarian'. And this, usually without regard to contextual factors that may have necessitated the making of the choices they made. Meanwhile, in Ethiopia, the choices were dictated by a history of misrule, accompanied by suppression of local group identities; exclusion or marginalisation of whole groups or regions; and political instability. In Rwanda, the RPF was driven by a determination to overcome a history of the state using group identity as a tool for systematic marginalisation of whole groups and the privileging of sections of the population. This had created deep intra-societal fissures whose contribution to political instability is now well established.

In addition, the RPF sought to foster enduring political stability. In this, the party would have to be intentional in combatting poverty and striving for prosperity for all. These ambitions necessitated the avoidance of approaches to governance that carry the potential to create divisions or deepen pre-existing ones. Specifically, they necessitated the organisation of politics in ways that maximised cooperation and collaboration among potentially adversarial political groups. This would minimise or rule out potentially disruptive contestations for power, which in much of Africa find expression in adversarial multi-party competition among weak political parties with narrow agendas.

Here the RPF in Rwanda has been more successful than the EPRDF was, in the sense that it managed to sell its vision of

'politics of consensus' to potential rivals that, almost 3 decades later, remain committed to working together rather than against each other, moreover in pursuit of similar ambitions, at the core of which is building a peaceful, stable, united and prosperous Rwanda in which all Rwandans feel they have a stake.

To credit these three liberation movements with the successful pursuit of their ambitions is not to disregard the massive challenges they have continued to face, both internally from local actors who seek to change the status quo, and from external actors, some of whom are also motivated by regime change ambitions. Indeed, in Ethiopia the EPRDF is no more and, thanks to unresolved internal issues, the force behind its creation, the TPLF, has virtually been destroyed in a recent armed conflict with the federal government. In Eritrea, the PFDJ remains firmly in control. There are some indications that the country may be moving or may soon be moving, at its own pace, towards reform. It is expected that this will eventually see the veteran fighters who have held it together amidst great adversity over the last 3 decades retire and hand over to a new generation whose instincts and ambitions may or may not be similar to theirs. For the RPF, it seems like early days to predict what will happen. However, right now there are strong indications that the political organisations to which it sold its vision and which have pursued it with as much commitment and zeal as the RPF itself, are content to remain part of the post-war ruling coalition, to continue to contribute to building a stable, peaceful, inclusive and prosperous Rwanda.

Clearly, success for a liberation movement does not lie simply in measuring up to international standards of anything or turning the country they inherit into an instant liberal democracy or run-away economic success. Rather, it lies in consistent pursuit of its original goals; inclusion, as much as possible, of groups that might otherwise foment instability

and even of ordinary citizens, in decision making; and pursuit of self-reliance. Self-reliance, as the Eritreans point out, does not mean non-cooperation or non-collaboration with other members of the international community where and when it matters. Success lies also in recalibrating relations with traditionally dominant powers and claiming much-needed space for autonomy in decision-making in both domestic and foreign policy.