



# THE ROOTS OF AFRICA'S LEADERSHIP DEFICIT

by Robert I. Rotberg

Robert Mugabe's misrule in Zimbabwe is a particularly grotesque chapter of an old, old story: after a promising start, an African leader descends into brutal tyranny. Why do so many African leaders go so terribly wrong? And will a new generation of African follow Mandela's model instead?

Leadership in Africa is typified more by disfiguring examples—the Idi Amins and Robert Mugabes—than by positive role models such as Nelson Mandela and Seretse Khama. Other clusters of developing nations, such as Southeast Asia or Latin America, exhibit wide variations in leadership quality, but none is so extreme in its range. During the past three decades roughly 90 percent of sub-Saharan Africa's leaders have behaved despotically, governed poorly, eliminated their people's human and civil rights, initiated or exacerbated existing civil conflicts, decelerated per capita economic growth, and proved corrupt.

Why should sub-Saharan Africa show such an extensive disparity between the many nation-states that have been and are poorly led and those few that consistently have been led well? Are the distinctions particularly African? Are they a product of colonial misrule? Do they reflect a common problem of transition from dependency to independence? Do they emanate from deep-rooted poverty and a lack of economic growth? Is sub-Saharan Africa's lamentable leadership record, in other words, attributable to exogenous variables beyond its

control, or does Africa respond less favorably to a leadership challenge of the same order as every other region's?

The positive examples of African leadership stand out because of their clear-minded strength of character, their adherence to participatory democratic principles, and their rarity. In contrast, the negative examples include so many varieties—predatory kleptocrats; autocrats, whether democratically elected or militarily installed; simple-minded looters; economic illiterates; and puffed-up posturers—that caricaturing or merely dismissing them would mislead. These single-minded, often narcissistic leaders are many and share common characteristics: they are focused on power itself, not on the uses of power for good; they are indifferent to the well-being of their citizens but anxious to receive their adulation; they are frequently destructive to and within their own countries, home regions excepted; unreachable by reason, they are quick to exploit social or racial ideologies for political and personal purposes; and they are partial to scapegoating, blame-shifting, and hypocrisy.

Good leaders globally, not only in sub-Saharan Africa, guide

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governments of nation-states to perform effectively for their citizens. They deliver high security for the state and the person; a functioning rule of law; education; health; and a framework conducive to economic growth. They ensure effective arteries of commerce and enshrine personal and human freedoms. They empower civil society and protect the environmental commons. Crucially, good leaders also provide their citizens with a sense of belonging to a national enterprise of which everyone can be proud. They knit rather than unravel their nations and seek to be remembered for how they have bettered the real lives of the ruled rather than the fortunes of the few.

Less benevolent, even malevolent, leaders deliver far less by way of performance. Under their stewardship, roads fall into disrepair, currencies depreciate and real prices inflate, health services weaken, life expectancies slump, people go hungry, schooling standards fall, civil society becomes more beleaguered, the quest for personal and national prosperity slows, crime rates accelerate, and overall security becomes more tenuous. Corruption grows. Funds flow out of the country into hidden bank accounts. Discrimination against minorities (and occasionally majorities) becomes prevalent. Civil wars begin.

It is easy in theory and in practice to distinguish among good, less-good, bad, and despicable leaders everywhere, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Good leaders improve the lives of their followers and make those followers proud of being a part of a new Camelot. Good leaders produce results, whether in terms of enhanced standards of living, basic development indicators, abundant new sources of personal opportunity, enriched schooling, skilled medical care, freedom from crime, or strengthened infrastructures. Bad and despicable leaders tear down the social and economic fabric of the lands; they immiserate their increasingly downtrodden citizens. Despicable rulers, particularly, oppress their own fellow nationals, depriving them of liberty, prosperity, and happiness.

Poverty within the context of resource abundance, as in oil-rich Nigeria from 1975 to 1999, indicates inadequate leadership. Despicable leadership is exemplified by Mugabe's Zimbabwe, a rich country reduced to the edge of starvation, penury, and fear. Economic growth from a low base in the aftermath of civil war and in a context of human resource scarcity, as in contemporary Mozambique, signals effective leadership. The opening of a long-repressed society, with attention to education and a removal of barriers to economic entrepreneurship, as in post-dictatorship Kenya, is another sign of progressive leadership.

Botswana is the paragon of leadership excellence in Africa. Long

before diamonds were discovered, the dirt-poor, long-neglected desert protectorate demonstrated an affinity for participation, integrity, tolerance of difference and dissent, entrepreneurial initiative, and the rule of law. The relative linguistic homogeneity of Botswana may have helped (but compare Somalia, where everyone speaks Somali, is Muslim, and there are clans but no separate ethnic groups). So would the tradition of chieftainship and the chiefly search for consensus after discussion among a *kgotla*, or assembly of elders. The century-old, deeply ingrained teachings of the congregational London Missionary Society mattered, too, and infected the country's dominant political culture. Botswana stands out in sub-Saharan Africa as the foremost country (along with Mauritius and South Africa) to have remained democratic in form and spirit continuously since its independence (in 1966). Throughout the intervening years it has conspicuously adhered strictly to the rule of law, punctiliously observed human rights and civil liberties, and vigorously attempted to enable its citizens to better their social and economic standings. A numerically small population (1.6 million) doubtless contributes to Botswana's relative success, and exploiting the world's richest gem diamond lodes—since 1975—has hardly made achieving strong results more difficult. But Angola, Gabon, and Nigeria all have abundant petroleum, without the same striking returns for their peoples.

Any examination of Botswana, especially before 1975, shows the value of well-intentioned, clear-eyed visionary leadership. Seretse Khama, heir to the paramount chieftaincy of the country's most important and largest ethnic polity, completed his bachelor's degree at Fort Hare College in South Africa in 1944, spent a year reading law at Balliol College, University of Oxford, and then studied for the bar at the Inner Temple in London. In 1948, he married Ruth Williams, a Briton, and returned home to take up his chieftainship. But the British colonial authorities prevented him from exercising the rights of paramountcy, and he and Ruth were exiled to Britain in 1951. Five years later, they were allowed to return, officially as commoners.

Khama came from a family of Bamangwato chiefs who were well regarded for their benevolence and integrity. His studies and his marriage may conceivably have reinforced those family traits. Being exiled might have embittered him, but Khama seems instead to have viewed exile as a mere bump along the road to leadership within the evolving context of Botswana's maturity from protectorate to nation. Whatever the combination of nature and nurture, when Khama (later Sir Seretse Khama) founded the Botswana Democratic Party

(BDP) in 1961 and led his country to independence, he already held dear those values of deliberative democracy and market economic performance that proved a recipe for his young country's political, social, and economic success. Modest, without obvious narcissism, non-ostentatious as a chief and leader (unlike so many of his African contemporaries), and conscious of achieving a national, enduring legacy, Sir Seretse was able to forge a political culture for the emergent Botswana—a system of values governing the conduct of political affairs—that has endured during the peaceful and increasingly prosperous presidencies of Sir Ketumile Masire and Festus Mogae, his successors.

Sir Seretse had a largely implicit, understated, but nevertheless substantial program for his people and his country. He put that program into place gradually, never succumbing to external political whims (such as the affinity for Afro-socialism or crypto-Marxism that infected his peers elsewhere in Africa), instant panaceas (such as nationalizing his productive mineral industries in the disastrous manner of neighboring Zambia), or posturing ineffectively against the hideous crimes of apartheid in nearby South Africa. Indeed, Sir Seretse and Sir Ketumile were deft and decisive in their disapproving but non-antagonistic approach to South Africa. Sir Seretse engineered his control of Botswana's diamond resources without frightening off or limiting investment from South Africa. He trained his own Botswanan successors and empowered them, but gradually, and without overstressing indigenous human resource capacities. Sir Seretse took no shortcuts. He and his successors abided no abridgements of citizen rights.

Sir Seretse could have done otherwise. As a paramount chief beloved by his people and respected for his learning, he could have behaved as so many of his African peers behaved during the 1960s and 1970s. If he had arrogated more and more power to himself, "for the good of his people," there would have been few critics. The rest of Africa had largely followed President Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana's first president from 1957-1966, in renouncing colonial traditions of representative government and becoming autocrats. Even gentle Julius Nyerere of Tanzania and equally gentle, modest Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia by the 1970s were abandoning inherited democratic forms and substituting single-party, single-man rule in place of broad participation. They were depriving judiciaries of independence and legislatures of autonomy. Objectors were jailed. Newspapers were banned or bought out. State radio broadcast only the words of the rulers.

Not Sir Seretse. He adhered to the nostrums that were no longer in current use in nearly all of Africa. For him, there was an ethic of performance and good governance to which he adhered. Sir Seretse was conscious every day that he could do better than the leaders of next-door South Africa, where whites oppressed the majority and deprived most inhabitants of their human rights and civil liberties. For whatever set of personal and pragmatic reasons, Sir Seretse epitomized world-class qualities of leadership.

In very different circumstances, Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam, the first leader of Mauritius (an offshore member of the African Union), operated under the same internalized leadership rules as Sir Seretse. Ramgoolam was more explicit in charting his vision, however—more in the manner of Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. When Sir Seewoosagar took the Mauritian prime ministerial reins immediately after independence in 1968 (remaining prime

minister until 1976), he understood that the island nation's *mélange* of colors and peoples—a plurality of Tamil-speaking Hindu Indians, Urdu- and Hindi-speaking Muslims from India and Pakistan, Chinese, and indigenous Creole-speaking Franco-Mauritians, most of whom were descended from slaves—could not long survive in peace if he or others were anything but transparently democratic. He stressed open politics, nurtured social capital, welcomed a free press, and strengthened the rule of law inherited from Britain, and earlier from France. Sir Seewoosagar also sensed that Mauritius' economy, hitherto based entirely on exporting raw sugar, would have to be diversified and grow. He attracted new investors from Asia. Soon Mauritius was a major world textile manufacturer; an island without sheep became a dominant supplier of wool garments.

Once again, leadership was central to Mauritius' post-independence transition from a potentially explosive racial hothouse and a primary producer subject to the fluctuations of world markets into a bustling, prosperous, politically hectic sustainable democracy. Sir Seewoosagar could have attempted to follow the other possible road to peace and growth on a crowded island of 1.2 million—strong, single-man rule of the Lee Kuan Yew variety. But the tactics that worked so well among overseas Chinese in Singapore might have been incendiary in Mauritius's multi-ethnic mix.

Likewise, without Nelson Mandela's inclusive leadership, black-run South Africa after 1994 would have been much more fractured and less successful in governing its apartheid-damaged peoples. Mandela's vision insisted on full rights for the majority, but without too abrupt a removal of minority economic privileges. It strengthened the rule of law, greatly broadened the delivery of essential services, largely maintained existing pillars of the economy such as transportation and communications networks, and slowly shifted away from the dominant command economy toward one that was more market driven.

Mandela, Khama, and Ramgoolam all led their nations democratically when they could have aggregated personal power. Their leadership model might have been more Asian—top-down, less open, less constitutional, and less multi-ethnic and multi-tribal—and still benevolent and thus accomplished. Instead, they demonstrated what few of their fellow African leaders then or since have demonstrated: that Africans are perfectly capable of building nations, developing sustainable democratic political cultures, and modernizing and growing their economies effectively. Given these particular individuals' disparate human and ethnic origins, and given their respective nations' very diverse colonial legacies, it makes no sense to assert that African traditional culture somehow inhibits the exercise of democratic leadership.

There must be other reasons for leadership gone wrong in Africa, especially for those men who begin as promising democrats and then emerge a term or two later as corrupt autocrats. Take Bakili Muluzi, president of Malawi, for example. After the thirty-year dictatorship of Dr. Hastings K. Banda ended, Muluzi led the new United Democratic Front (UDF) against Banda and his associates, promising a return to full-fledged democracy. Overwhelmingly victorious, the UDP and Muluzi took power in 1994 and governed reasonably effectively during their first five-year term. Educational and health services were expanded, civil society and an open press were embraced, the judges were released from their fetters, and serious steps were taken to

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improve the very poor country's economic performance. Muluzi presided genially over this peaceful and welcomed transition from autocracy in his country of twelve million people.

Muluzi's second term, from 1999, began well enough, although the sticky stain of corruption soon began to spread through the upper echelons of government and around the state house. Economic growth stagnated, not least because of decisions not made by the president and the arrangement of special deals for presidential associates. In 2002, he decided that Malawi would be better off if he broke the constitutional provision against a third presidential term, beginning in 2004. (President Frederick Chiluba, in Zambia, another post-dictatorial reformer, tried the same argument to keep his presidency, but was rebuffed by Parliament and the citizenry. In Namibia, however, President Sam Nujoma successfully breached his country's constitution and now serves a third term.)

Malawi's Parliament denied Muluzi the needed constitutional amendments twice, and Muluzi reluctantly backed away from a third-term attempt in 2003. Instead, he bulldozed the ruling party's executive committee into letting him hand-pick a questionable successor (illegal by party rules), and then compelled a suddenly called meeting of the UDF to amend the party's by-laws to give him that authority, and also to make him permanent chair of the party, in control of its finances. Key cabinet ministers resigned, and Malawi's politics were soon thrown into turmoil—all local matters which concern us little here. The main question is what causes a democrat to turn autocratic? Is it simply that absolute power corrupts absolutely, as Lord Acton said long ago?

Mugabe is another of many African leaders who began by governing plausibly (in 1980, in Mugabe's case), only to turn venal later. Admittedly, within a few years of assuming power in Zimbabwe, he had used a special military brigade to kill 20,000 to 30,000 followers of a key opponent. But the first eighteen years of Mugabe's prime ministerial and presidential leadership (the title changed in 1987) also brought enlarged educational and medical opportunities, economic growth, relatively modest levels of official corruption, and comparatively calm relations between the tiny white commercial farming community and black Africans. Throughout the period, Mugabe astutely gained more and more personal power. He used official terror to remove challengers, and state-supplied patronage to keep senior supporters in line. From about 1991, his onetime key backers say, Mugabe began behaving with more and more omnipotence and arrogance. He was reelected frequently as president, and his largely obedient party dominated Parliament. Every now and

again one or two outspoken dissidents were tolerated.

By 1998, Mugabe was seventy-four years old, married for the second time, and increasingly cranky that Mandela's release from prison and assumption of the South African presidency had dimmed Mugabe's own attempt to be a major player in all-African politics. His second wife was known, too, to be avaricious, and by 1998 corruption at the highest levels of Zimbabwe had grown in scale and audacity. Mugabe sought to salt away wealth for his extended family. He also gave license to the corrupt activities of others so that he could control them, in the manner of Mobutu Sese Seko of the Congo. Then, in 1998, Mugabe unilaterally decided to send 13,000 soldiers to the Congo, ostensibly to assist Laurent Kabila, the rebel successor to Mobutu, to defend against a Rwandan-organized invasion. Mugabe also wanted to grab the diamonds, cobalt, cadmium, and gold of the Congo for himself.

With Zimbabwean troops in the Congo until 2003, and corruptly acquired funds fleeing to safe havens offshore, Mugabe and his cronies bled Zimbabwe until, by 2000, the foreign exchange coffers were largely empty and food and fuel shortages began to recur regularly. By then he had also unleashed thugs against commercial farmers, using an old tactic to mobilize indigenous support. This time, however, it failed to do so, especially in the cities. Mugabe lost a critical constitutional referendum in early 2000. By mid-year he had also come within a few seats of losing his party's parliamentary majority in a national election. The Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), led by Morgan Tsvangirai, had posed a formidable challenge and, indeed, claimed that Mugabe's party had falsified the votes in several key constituencies.

Mugabe lashed out furiously against the MDC, and attacked whites and blacks suspected of supporting the opposition. The country's once formidable rule of law became the law of the jungle, with Mugabe packing the Supreme Court and threatening High Court judges until they retired or resigned. Legions of hired thugs attacked white farmers and forcibly occupied the farms (despite High Court injunctions), thus depressing agricultural productivity. When Tsvangirai stood against Mugabe in the 2002 presidential election, he was defeated in a poll widely believed in Europe, the U.S., and among Zimbabweans to have been rigged. Even after such a disputed triumph, Mugabe persisted in victimizing MDC members and their presumed supporters. Having driven Zimbabwe to the brink of starvation in 2002 and 2003, he and his lackeys sought to deprive areas that had voted for the MDC of relief shipments of food.

By late-2003, Zimbabweans faced constant shortages of food and fuel. Unemployment had reached 80 percent and inflation 500 percent. The U.S. dollar, worth 38 Zimbabwean dollars in 2000, was being traded on the street for 5,000 local dollars. Hospitals operated without basic medicines. Schools were closed. President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell called for Mugabe's ouster, an unusual step, and so did Prime Minister Tony Blair. Zimbabwe's Council of Churches also railed at Mugabe, a Jesuit-trained Catholic. Tsvangirai, meanwhile, was indicted for treason and served some time in jail, as did many of his senior MDC colleagues. Mugabe, throughout, resisted entreaties to retire, as the once proud, wealthy country spiraled into decay.

These appalling details are less relevant, here, than seeking to explain why Mugabe and Muluzi, Chiluba and Nujoma, and also former President Daniel arap Moi of Kenya and many other African leaders perform adequately during their early elected terms and then, in their second terms or beyond, become despots. Is it the inevitability of Acton's aphorism, or some law

## Africa needs leaders who serve whole nations, not tribes.

of diminished accountability? Most African leaders, the Botswanan and South African presidents and the Mauritian prime ministers aside, travel in pompous motorcades, put their faces on the local currencies, and expect to see photographs of themselves in every shop and office. Almost invariably, the less legitimate the office and the less robust the country, the more ostentatious their displays and the more stilted their bearing and manner.

Is it the African reverence for "big men," a hangover from pre-colonial reverence for chieftainship, that turns democrats into despots and persuades obedient electorates to support the pretensions of their peers turned potentates? Would it help if the new nations of sub-Saharan Africa abandoned executive presidencies on the American model and reverted to pure parliamentary governing systems with ceremonial heads of state?

African leaders are driven by instincts no baser than those of their colleagues in Asia, Europe, or the U.S. But African electorates tend to acquiesce for long periods to the autocratic actions of their leaders. That acquiescence may stem from the sheer rawness of democracy in Africa, and from the absence of a long period of preparation for democracy, unlike in colonial India or the West Indies. The African press's lack of sophistication and independence is a contributing factor. Civil society is also weaker. Extensive public-sector patronage in most African countries also allows leaders to escape criticism until their leadership excesses are obvious.

Africa for the most part lacks a hegemonic bourgeoisie—a business class that is independent of government and capable of thriving without patronage and contracts; such independence lessens the zero-sum quality of a rule. In those few countries where there is that independence, as in South Africa but not yet Nigeria, a leader approaching the end of his term in office does not have to worry about taking the perquisites with him and

looting the country before he and his colleagues go. In many other countries in Africa, especially the poorer ones, the incentives to grab it all are great.

Throughout most of Africa there is little expectation, thus far, that successors will be fair, that an incoming political movement will not necessarily victimize its predecessors, and that there is an acceptable role for former presidents and prime ministers—except, notably, in Mauritius and Botswana. In many places, too, there is as yet no sustainable democratic political culture. That is, whereas American and European politicians might want to behave as autocrats, they are restrained by the norms of their dominant political cultures and the likelihood of being found out. In Africa, shame is less apparent than a kind of entitlement. Once elected, or once chosen by a military junta to rule, the president confuses himself with the state—in some way thinking of himself as embodying and being the state. It is only the exceptional individuals like Khama or Mandela who can escape the deep psychological trap of constant sycophancy. Like Louis XIV, others come to accept their own importance as the suns around which their little countries revolve. Except in a few places like Botswana, where an early leader knew better and emulated President Washington's refusal to be royal, African leaders and their followers largely believe that the people are there to serve their rulers, rather than the other way around.

Fortunately, there are a handful of very new leaders in Africa who espouse an ethic of good governance. They are distinguished from their less democratic peers by a willingness to govern transparently, to consult with interest groups within their populations that are not their own, to create an atmosphere of tolerance and fairness in their official operations, and to strengthen the institutions of their societies. These promising new leaders include Presidents Abdoulaye Wade of Senegal, who had opposed previous methods of rule for decades and now rules consensually; Mwai Kibaki of Kenya, in opposition from 1992 to his election in late 2002; John Kuffour of Ghana, who has begun reducing the corrupt climate of his autocratic predecessor; and Prime Minister Pakalitha Mosisili of tiny Lesotho, who has modernized his country's methods of governance through a process of laborious national consultation.

Africa is not yet ready to parse distinctions between transactional and transformational leadership. It needs leaders in the first instance who serve whole nations, not just their tribes or ethnic groups or extended families. It needs leaders who embrace responsibility for the commonweal, and not for a group of associates who live off and puff up a country's all-commanding autocrat. It desperately needs new leaders who take Khama and Mandela as their models and embrace the Washingtonian-like restraints that they embodied. Once there are a cadre of leaders who espouse and embody in their actions the democratic values that emboldened Khama, Mandela, and Ramgoolam, and now drive their successors and men like Wade, Kibaki, Koffour, and Mosisili, Africa will begin to move from despotism and denials of human rights to the era of democratic leadership. Given the timbre of Africa's younger leaders, and the spread throughout Africa of global bourgeois democratic values, that era may soon be at hand. ■

Robert Rotberg is director of the program on intrastate conflict and conflict resolution in the Belfer Center at the John F. Kennedy School of Government and president of the World Peace Foundation.