

POLITICAL REORGANISATION IN AFRICA: LESSONS FROM CANADA'S NORTHERN TERRITORIES

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In this paper, we examine the lessons that can be learnt from the 'consensus system' of government practiced in the Northern Territories of Canada. We project the benefits of this system on African states that are made of several diverse ethnic groups, which situation has proven to be a challenge in the design of workable political systems. We argue that using 'independents' as members of legislatures in Africa may provide greater benefits to the viability of political systems than using the political party systems currently in place.

Political Realities

An examination of political realities in Africa will reveal that prior to the existence of modern nation states in Africa as they exist now, kingdoms, chieftaincies and diverse ethnic groups existed.¹ These chieftaincies and kingdoms used their own languages, had their own cultures and social norms. They were largely almost undemocratic. Most of their decision-making was through consultation — if they thought the input of citizens were relevant.

Fast track to the year 2008 in Africa. Tribes, chieftaincies and kingdoms still exist, with the same languages, social norms and cultures acting as a uniting factor, forming ethnic blocks in most African states. Tribal followings and loyalties crystallise ethnic groupings in the body politics of modern nations states. The presence of diverse ethnic groups in various states has made it tricky to put up workable political systems.²

However, the postcolonial states have ineffectively copied Western political systems. Political parties now abound in most countries' legislatures and aspire to operate with the same effectiveness, as they exist in Western democracies — but without success. Even the most advanced and oldest political parties in Africa, such as the African National Congress, are prone to confusion and discord along ethnic or tribal lines.

While political parties present candidates in legislative and presidential elections for state offices based on ideologies of political party platforms, the support for candidates in these elections tends not to be on ideology and party platforms, but more based on ethnic, tribal and regional followings.³

The loyalty factor

In Africa, when compared to political parties that operate in its political systems based on ideology and political party platforms, the tribe or ethnic following seems to command the highest degree of loyalty.⁴ Nepotism, corruption, ethnic wars, distribution of ministerial positions or power, and

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¹ Mafeje, A. 'The ideology of 'Tribalism''. *Journal of Modern African Studies* Vol 9 No 2(1971) pp 253-261

² July, RW. *A History of the African People* (5th Ed 1998) Waveland Press, Prospect Heights, Illinois, USA. The political history of Africa is littered with ethnic based parties and these can be seen even from their names, e.g. Pan-Ibo Federal Union, Northern Peoples Congress (all from Nigeria), ABAKO (*Alliance des Ba-Kongo*) CONAKAT (*Confederation des Association Tribal du Katanga*) all from the Congo.

³ Recent elections in Nigeria saw the Hausas of the North, pitted against the Yorubas and Ibos of the South.

⁴ Bates, RH. 'Ethnic Competition and Modernisation in Contemporary Africa', in *Comparative Political Studies*, 1974, Vol.6, pp.457-481.

marginalization of minorities are the consequences. Even when parties are used their political support tends to be ethnic-based rather than ideology-based.

The ethnic loyalty factor has yet to be factored in or accounted for properly in African political systems. This 'loyalty factor' has deprived political parties operating in legislatures of the kind of discipline and loyalty they need to operate effectively.⁵ Within political parties, ethnic groupings tend to dominate the scene, as opposed to politicians with the best ideas or the best skills to lead.⁶

This reality creates conflicts of interest. A politician easily finds himself/herself having to choose between what is best for the region and ethnic group they identify with, and what the political party platform is. Loyalty to his tribe or ethnic group may not give him/her a place in the political party. But the region and tribe the politician originated from most often are the constituents that elected him to the legislature. In a political scene where one ethnic group usually dominates a political party, the 'party position' turns out to be the promotion of the interests of the dominant ethnic group, rather than any ideology or the wider public interest.

The system used in the northern territories of Canada, however, shows how tribes or ethnic origin may be used as a rallying point for effective governance, peacefully, and that this example could be a useful one for Africa.⁷

Approaching the Problem through the 'Northern Solution'

In the Northern Territories of Canada, made up of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, the territorial legislatures use 'the consensus style of government'. These legislatures do not use political parties. Members of the legislative assemblies (MLA) run for office as 'independents'. They participate in the legislative process as independent members as opposed to members of political parties and are accountable to their constituencies.

There are several different Aboriginal ethnic groups in Northern Canada, largely living in these two territories and similar in structure to tribes in Africa.⁸ The system of consensus government was designed for this region because the consensus style of government is what is closest in modern political terms to the way Aboriginal tribal groups or bands make decisions.⁹ This is key to the success of this system.

Regions in each territory are divided into 'ridings', and each riding is entitled to an MLA that represents it in the legislative assembly. Ridings that fall in metropolitan areas take into consideration the wishes of the metropolitan citizens, that are likely to be more cosmopolitan; while those of ridings that are more indigenous look to the wishes of their indigenous constituents. Once the assembly is constituted, members elect a premier. Together with the other members, they select the executive council, which is the cabinet.

⁵ The Social Democratic Front in Cameroon often find its members of different regions working in camps, and the same can be said for the Cameroon's People Democratic Movement.

⁶ Nyamnjoh FB, 'Cameroon: A country united by ethnic ambition and difference' *African Affairs* Vol.98 (390) 101-118. This is especially true for both the ruling political party and the opposition parties in Cameroon, i.e. the Cameroon's People Democratic Party and the Social Democratic Front.

⁷ Eisenberg, A. 'Pluralism, Consociationalism, Group differentiated Citizenship and the problem of social cohesion', (Victoria) University of British Columbia. This article discusses how Arend Lijpart's theory of consociation can assist culturally segmented societies to become integrated.

⁸ Among these groups are the Dene, the Gwichin, the Sahtu Dene, the Inuvialuit, and the Akaicho, speaking different languages with different cultures and norms.

⁹ Dacks, G. *A Choice of Futures: Politics in the Canadian North*. Methuen Publications, Agincourt, Ontario, Canada 1981.

A close look at what has happened in the Northern Territories of Canada finds that, without the distractions of political parties for competing loyalties, Aboriginal groups are producing a crop of leaders that are more interested in developmental efforts. One can surmise that this system of excluding party politics has given the government more legitimacy amongst Aboriginal people, since the presence of party discipline in the system will have interfered with the way Aboriginal people make decisions.¹⁰

Even though the operational situation of Aboriginal peoples in the Northern Territories in Canada is markedly different from those of tribes in Africa, an argument can be made that in countries with several ethnic groups participating in a political system, using ‘independent’ representatives at the legislature may be more beneficial than introducing political parties into the system.

Benefits of using independents

Having selected MLAs running as independents, regional or tribal interests are likely to be more accountable to that region than a legislator who is a member of a political party. In using this system, tribal loyalties which are still a reality in Africa today, are accounted for in the political process bringing government closer to the people, as opposed to the use of ineffective political parties which may not command the same loyalty.¹¹

With the system of independent MLAs, various ethnic groups in a state are more likely to meet on the political table to discuss issues facing the country as equals, than when political parties participate in the legislatures, since the situation when one ethnic group dominates a political party is avoided. Equally a dominant ethnic group in a ruling party is less likely to take a disproportionate number of cabinet positions, or over-represent itself in the civil service, the army and police. Where multiple ethnic groups exist, a system run by independents elected from various regions (ethnicities) makes it easier for parliament to play oversight functions, than it is for a legislature where all members belong to political parties.

Since all members of the legislature run as independents as opposed to political parties, the attraction to power in the form of the ‘big man syndrome’ in African politics is diffused. In systems with party politics, the leader of a political party usually ends up as prime minister or president, while the losing party becomes the opposition or government in waiting. In the consensus system, the absence of parties makes it harder to predict who the premier might be.

Because of the convention on cabinet solidarity, in the consensus system in the Northwest Territories, the government (seven cabinet ministers including the premier) acts more or less like a minority government (in relation to the 11 ordinary members of the legislature).¹² The cabinet and premier are elected by the members of the legislature, as opposed to the political party situation where the premier or prime minister appoints a cabinet.¹³ Hence the entire cabinet serves at the pleasure of the members of the legislature. This keeps ministers and premiers with less power than the party system. Members can always remove a premier or cabinet minister easily if they are not living up to expectations. The

¹⁰ See Dacks, G cited at 9 at p.110. Aboriginal culture prizes close consultation prior to major decision-making.

¹¹ See Abele, F. ‘The Democratic potential in administrative expansion: Assessing the impact of the transfer of governing responsibilities from the Federal Government to the Government of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories’, in *Devolution and Constitutional Development in the Canadian North*, ed Gurston Dacks (Ottawa, Carleton University Press, 1990). The author notes the election of more Aboriginal people into the Legislative Assembly has resulted in government policies that reflect more accurately the interest of Aboriginal People in the territorial government.

¹² The Northwest Territories has 19 members in the House of Assembly; 7 members form the cabinet. The main power the premier has over cabinet members is the distribution of ministerial portfolios. He can choose to withdraw ministerial portfolios if he is dissatisfied with a minister. But he does not have the power to remove the minister from cabinet. Only the House of Assembly can remove a cabinet minister.

¹³ White, G. *Cabinets and First Ministers* (2005 UBC Press) at p.59.

flexibility it gives legislators to remove premiers and ministers will put a stop to the practice of leaders in Africa ruling undemocratically for extremely long periods.

To gain support and ascend to leadership will depend more on negotiations and political leadership skill. The enhanced oversight capacity of the legislature thus prevents the cabinet members, the heads of sections of the civil service and the paramilitary institutions from abuse of their powers in favour of one ethnicity.

In this system, since political loyalty remains with the regions as opposed to political parties, corruption, a scourge of many African governments can be eradicated faster than in a system where political parties exist. Political parties tend to shield and defend members even when they are wrong, especially when the parties contain over-representation from one ethnic group. But in a consensus system full of independents, it is easier for fairness and justice to reign since the shield provided by political parties to members of a particular dominant ethnic group does not exist, again, a result of the enhanced oversight capacity.

The absence of political parties in the system means the absence of whips in the legislative system. The conflict of interest that reigns in the mind of a legislature's member, whether to vote the interest of constituents or the interest of his party where both conflict is resolved. He is accountable to his constituents alone. There are no party platforms, therefore, the constituencies have a greater role to influence public policy through their members.

Regional balance in terms of development is enhanced since groups of MLAs from regions with higher populations have to negotiate with those from less developed areas for developmental projects.¹⁴ This possibility ends the practice where political parties cater to vote rich areas, neglecting areas with low concentration of citizens. Selective development is dealt with to a reasonable extent.

Consociationalism

The Northern Territories of Canada also provides an example of consociationalism: a political arrangement where various ethnic groups within a country share power according to an agreed formula or mechanism.

In the Northwest Territories, the Electoral Boundaries Commission divides electoral ridings. Amongst the factors it must take into consideration in doing so are not only population densities but also noteworthy community boundaries, and boundaries established under self-government agreements including land claims and treaty entitlement agreements.¹⁵

Distribution of electoral ridings based on population distributions, without accounting for the ethnic make up of regions, glosses over real hard truths of political realities in Africa. By ignoring this reality, when compared to Aboriginal groups in the Northern Territories of Canada, tribal political structures in Africa have largely lost any formal role in the political process, a gap that is viciously exploited by political parties.

Ethnic-based indigenous developmental organizations have sprung up in most parts of Africa. However there are few avenues to advocate their developmental causes in the political process because the ethnic make up or component in the political process does not simply exist. Most are forced to work with chiefs and traditional leaders that are powerless in the political process. Some

¹⁴ The convention for the distribution of ministerial positions in this system ensures two ministers come from the Northern region, two from the central and two from the southern regions.

¹⁵ See section 9(e) of the NWT Electoral Boundaries Commission Act (2003). Members of the same ethnic or Aboriginal Group usually are members of the same communities, who would have been promoters or beneficiaries of self-government agreements and land claims.

traditional rulers are forced to declare party loyalties thereby eroding their traditional power bases, while some choose to stay neutral, depriving themselves of participation in the political process.¹⁶ Political parties in Africa pretend not to be ethnic based – even though their support tends to promote particular ethnicities. The use of a consensus system where independents are elected may provide a formula for better representation of ethnic groups in the system, without a need to deny ethnicity as a factor.

Factoring the ethnic component while drawing up electoral constituencies, and taking this ethnic reality into account gives room for effective governance in that, indigenous institutions and organizations, get directly involved in the political processes making use of the ethnic factor. Instead of being a destructive force in politics, it could be a building motivational force. For example, there are hardly any rivalries amongst the Aboriginal groups in Northern Canada. But one can notice peaceful coexistence in the political process, as each group tends to focus inwards in bringing out the best it can as opposed to attacking one another.

How we got here

Britain and France have political systems that have evolved gradually over centuries, with political parties that are founded on ideology. The vast majority of countries in Europe, including England and France, have one dominant language, though minority languages exist. The culture in most countries and social norms are more or less similar or close. In this context, a politics based on political parties makes sense.

The situation in Africa is very different. Many nation states have people speaking many different languages with different cultural values and different social norms. However, after the colonial era, the party system was copied into the political systems of most African countries, without a full understanding how party systems work. One-party states were used in some countries in the immediate post independence era as a way to build national unity. Yet today the ethnic divisions that one-party states were supposed to resolve are still prevalent, with no signs of abating. It is a mystery that some political parties have even emerged and performed to the level they achieve.

The legacy of colonialism, tribal differences and ethnic conflicts in Africa has left many ethnic groups in most countries with deep suspicions of one another. It is extremely challenging to create solid political parties that tie the following of their members because even when party organizers form parties and campaign, accusations of nepotism arise easily. These are the offshoots of divisions and ineffectiveness in the parties. Even minor issues like the use of one tribal language over another are easy to spark differences among party members.

The use of independents in Canada's Northern Territories to create robust vibrant legislatures has shown that Westminster styled legislatures can be modified to blend with indigenous forms of decision making successfully. For most countries in Africa, this could be a route to consociationalism or power sharing that can provide stability and good governance.

¹⁶ Nyamnjoh, FB 'Chieftaincy and Democracy in Modern Africa' www.nyamnjoh.com consulted on Feb 29 2008.