

# Why NEPAD and African Politics Don't Mix

By Ian Taylor | February 16, 2004

It is now over two years since the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was launched in Abuja, Nigeria and perhaps time to review the progress that this project for supporting development in Africa has made. Stripped to its bare bones, the NEPAD is a "partnership" with the developed world whereby African countries will set up and police standards of good government across the continent—whilst respecting human rights and advancing democracy—in return for increased aid flows, private investment, and a lowering of obstacles to trade by the West. An extra inflow of U.S.\$64 billion from the developed world has been touted as the "reward" for following approved policies on governance and economics.

The sad fact is that there has been very little concrete progress, although plenty of meetings, summits, pronouncements, and speeches have marked the NEPAD thus far, the latest being in Kigali last weekend. Why there has been little concrete progress so far is because of the very nature of post-colonial African politics. Most commentaries ignore the reality that power in African politics must be understood as the utilization of patronage and not as the performance of legitimacy drawn from the sovereign will of the people. In other words, in spite of the façade of the modern state, power in most African polities progresses informally, between patron and client along lines of reciprocity. It is intensely personalized and is not exercised on behalf of the public good. Zimbabwe is a good example of this, but most other African countries broadly follow this pattern, including such NEPAD stalwarts such as Nigeria, Gabon, Congo-Brazzaville, etc. Very few countries (Botswana a prime example) have avoided such a state of affairs.

In a traditional patrimonial system, all ruling relationships are personal relationships and the difference between the private and public spheres is non-existent. Under a neo-patrimonial system the separation of the public from the private is recognized (even if in practice only on paper) and is certainly publicly displayed through outward manifestations of the rational-bureaucratic state: a currency, a flag, borders, a "government," and even bureaucratic offices etc. However, in practical terms the private and public

spheres are habitually not detached and the outward signs of statehood are often façades hiding the real workings of the system. Consider the fate of Air Zimbabwe and Harrods shopping sprees by Mugabe as a good example; perhaps an extreme example but indicative of a broader trend, which varies across the continent.

## Africa's Zero Sum Politics

Clientelism is central to neo-patrimonialism, with widespread networks of clients receiving services and resources in return for support. This relationship may be likened at the highest (presidential) level to that of a father and his children whereby political legitimacy rests on the idea that government stands in the same relationship to its citizens as a father does to his children. Essentially, the father serves as the nurturer, teacher, and most importantly, provider to the nation and in return he receives love and support from his children. It is when he can no longer perform this function that the system starts to fall apart.

Crucially, resources extracted from the state are deployed as the means to maintain support and legitimacy in this system, with the effect that the control of the state is equivalent to the control of resources, which in turn is crucial for remaining a Big Man. That is what lies at the heart of the profound reluctance by African presidents to hand over power voluntarily and why almost all African regimes end in controversial circumstances. In most cases the demo-



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cratic option is either absent or is not respected by the loser; the stakes simply are too high, as once one is out of the loop regarding access to state resources, the continuation of one's status as a Big Man becomes virtually impossible. Politics in Africa thus tends to be a zero-sum game.

The origins of this system lie in the colonial era. Upon achieving independence, the newly emergent African political elites inherited a state system that exhibited scarcity in legitimacy, capacity to administer (now that the colonialist bureaucracy had left), and, to varying degrees, the resources to underpin the new state. Thus it was in this environment that independent Africa's elites sought to exert their supremacy. The inflation of particular leaders' egos as the personal embodiment of the country's liberation and thus emblematic of the very nation itself also staked out the milieu of the immediate post-colonial era.

The initial tendency was to encourage an increased role for the state in most aspects of the economy. Industrialization and indigenization were the watchwords of the immediate post-colonial era and the state was the vehicle through which these twin goals could be achieved, primarily through nationalization. However, extracted surplus, though appropriated in the name of the state, quickly became a means by which state elites sought to distribute resources as a tool to construct political support. Through the state, top office-holders controlled an extensive array of resources and influenced their distribution and accumulation with an eye to political advantage as well as personal gain. Such arrangements had the effect of creating a whole swathe of politically connected persons who became dependent upon largesse from state elites and who acted as a support constituency, whilst mediating between the Big Men at the top and the masses below.

## Access to Resources

The problem for African development is that whilst individuals within such patronage networks may benefit handsomely, the system fundamentally fails to promote economic growth and development and in actual fact rapidly sabotaged the high aspirations of independence. Supplying the networks upon which the Big Men could draw support became paramount. Hence the idea that state resources should primarily be channeled toward "national development" became out of the question in most instances. Donor aid in places filled the gap, but even that became seen as a useful resource that could be tapped. Broadly, productive economic activities and notions of long-term investment became sidelined in favor of immediate consumption and resource diffusion.

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## Who Leads on Democratization?

Whilst the system may have lubricated politics during the golden days of early independence, the manifestly extractive strain that this placed upon the economy began to show as independence entered its second decade. Because access to resources depended upon being inside the state apparatus, patrons rewarded supporters with sinecures in the government and nationalized industries. The bureaucracy sooner or later were transformed into administrations in which staff were less agents of state policy (i.e. civil servants) than proprietors, distributors, and even major consumers of the authority and resources of the government.

Such a situation inevitably led to an overblown and chronically inept state and parastatal structures which undermined and then parasitized upon those (declining) elements of the economy that remained productive. The inevitable economic meltdown occurred. Certainly, the collapse of commodity prices in the 1970s and the onset of the ongoing chronic debt situation contributed to this crisis but cannot be held totally accountable. In many respects, the situation of the mid-1970s onwards merely exacerbated structural weaknesses inherent in the neo-patrimonial system itself.

Conditions deteriorated and the milk cow of the state could no longer succor the system. As a result, corruption deepened as office-holders sought alternative resource flows—it became the norm, the *modus operandi* of the whole system. The net effect has been to erode any sense of broad public accountability in favor of narrow privatized networks of influence and an informalization of politics. Outsiders (the opposition, for instance) want to get inside the loop and very few wish to fundamentally change the overall situation. If they do, very many quickly succumb later. This is the reality of contemporary Africa, something which the NEPAD fails to understand.

The irony is that the type of good governance solutions advanced by the NEPAD would deprive such rulers of the means to maintain their patronage networks. To have an Africa grounded on the governance principles of the NEPAD would actually erode the base upon which the state is predicated. And yet

we are expected to believe that the very same African elites who benefit from the neo-patrimonial state will now commit a form of class suicide. The possibility seems improbable. Trying to enlist the support of elites who are expected to undermine their own positions and the positions of their patrons is naive. The whole system is based on privatized patronage and the prohibition and erosion of real, functioning democracy—in other words, broad accountability. To begin implementing and operating by the rubric of “good governance” would inevitably damage the incumbent elites’ own personalized grip on the system and reduce their ability to service their clients, inevitably leading to their loss of power.

As a result, any monitoring of governance standards and the improvement in democratic principles on the continent cannot remain elite-driven nor, from the perspective of the donor community, dependent upon the whims of the elites within government. It is a nonsensical strategy to rely on the Big Men to be the engines of positive change in Africa. Whilst the NEPAD remains so dependent upon corrupt dictators to miraculously embrace good governance and democracy, something which goes against the very logic of their own rule, its project to promote the continent’s regeneration in the new millennium, will likely remain stillborn. Africa’s peoples must be the engineers of their own liberation, not wait passively, hoping for “change” to emerge from the clouds or fall from the table of the Big Men like so many crumbs of bread. The international community’s role should be to support this self-liberation, not legitimize the illegitimate.

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