
RENEWING GOOD LEADERSHIP: OVERCOMING THE SCOURGES OF AFRICA

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Africa is greatly afflicted by many apocalyptic scourges – HIV/AIDs, tropical diseases like malaria, global warming and frequent bouts of drought, and periodic waves of pestilence, especially locust infestations. It suffers greatly from war: approximately 12 million civilians have lost their lives in the intrastate battles of the last sixteen years. For all of these reasons, and others, Africa each year lags farther behind Asia and Latin America in economic growth attainments; four decades ago Africa was well ahead of Asia. At the same time, at the beginning of the independence era, Africa also claimed a number of responsible leaders who sought better lives for their peoples, not just bountiful rewards for themselves. But now there are only a few African nations with long traditions of good governance and effective leadership. What are the reasons and what is a possible remedy?

Compared to the Asian and Caribbean experience, colonial rule in Africa was brief, with settled foreign-run governments in much of Africa for only about fifty years. There was little time, especially in the least devolutionary cases like Congo, to nurture democracy or responsible leadership. Furthermore, the colonies were inherently non-democratic, even in those few territories where indirect rule was practiced conscientiously. Moreover, African nationalist movements date in a few cases from the nineteenth century, but in most cases they are products of the twentieth century. In India and the British Caribbean, by contrast, indigenous anti-colonial sentiments were nurtured from the eighteenth century in settings that affirmed democracy and leadership rectitude.

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Sheer size has an effect, too. Most of the members of the African Union are small, with sparse populations. Thus, human resource capacities are stretched thin. This generalization cannot explain giant Nigeria's leadership deficiencies, or explain why tiny Botswana and Mauritius have performed so well. But in many of the other countries, the available talent pool has been limited. Moreover, in most countries secondary and university educational opportunity is a recent luxury. Many African nations still have major educational deficits. Early leaders were drawn almost exclusively from tiny colonial-educated and -socialized elites. Those generations were in some cases succeeded by military personnel, not always officers, who had little formal education. When these "jumped up" enlisted men gained power they gave all-out greed a new name and bizarre methods of governance a new meaning.

Unlike post-colonial Asia and the Caribbean, too, most of the smaller African countries, and even Nigeria, still lack a hegemonic bourgeoisie. Governments control large portions of national GDP and dominate employment opportunity. Businessmen feed off or depend upon a regime's patronage and its willingness to grant licenses and permits. Governments distribute favors rather than providing platforms for individual entrepreneurship. In such conditions, graft and other forms of corruption flourish.

One result, after almost five decades of African independence, is a paucity of good governance and an abundance of deficient leadership. Most African despots take as much as they can as quickly as they can. Others favor their relatives or their clansmen, and pay only lip service to leading a whole, often disparately composed nation.

The positive outliers are Botswana and Mauritius, two small countries that have developed a tradition of good leadership since the late 1960s, and today boast Africa's strongest and most secure democratic political cultures. Both have always run open economies, created strong rule of law systems, and tolerated ample free expression, free association, and dissent. Free and fair elections have been standard. Both governments have consistently delivered high quality governance to their peoples.

The successful cases of prosperous Botswana and Mauritius, and the much younger successful good governance examples of Senegal, Ghana, Lesotho, and South Africa, demonstrate the importance of good leadership. Without effective, responsible, committed, and honest leaders and leadership, Africa will hardly thrive. In these successful cases, leaders were insistent on working for their national citizens, and not primarily for their kinsmen. Sir Seretse Khama in Botswana and Sir Seewoosagar Ramgoolam in Mauritius were both explicit about governing for, not against, their peoples. They demonstrated integrity, and were never overly worried about losing favor. Devoid of traditional or learned forms of narcissism, they eschewed personality cults, motorcades, ostentation, and avarice. Alone of the early African leadership cadres, they succeeded, by force of will, to create democratic value systems that are sustained within their countries to this day.

Their examples provide helpful models for contemporary Africa. Indeed, the African Leadership Council, created in 2004 with help from the Kennedy School, is attempting to build on the exemplary work of Sir Seretse and Sir Seewoosagar by setting standards for African leadership and by building capacity within Africa for good leadership. The Council, chaired by Sir Ketumile Masire, Botswana's second president, and including General Yakubu Gowon, former head of state of Nigeria, James Jonah of Sierra Leone and the United Nations, former Prime Minister Hage Geingob of Namibia, and a host of other distinguished African leaders of skill and integrity, has developed a Code of African Leadership. It also has prepared a program of training for the next generation of African leadership, and hopes this year to begin recruiting the first of annual intakes of young, elected, political leaders for special training seminars at the Kennedy School. The Council intends, by this capacity building mechanism, to alter the continent's appreciation of and practice of leadership, and thus to transform African governance from mostly poor to mostly good over the course of a decade. The lessons of Botswana and Mauritius, and now of Ghana, Lesotho, Senegal, and South Africa, will be distilled and offered to a new generation of upcoming leaders from all of Africa. That could make a major difference. There is no reason why Africans everywhere should not enjoy beneficent and tolerant rule, the absence of internal conflict, and the possibility of rising living standards. The Council believes that by socializing and acculturating the new leaders of Africa, large numbers of citizens will thus benefit.