

## **PUBLIC SEMINAR REPORT**

Leadership, 'Political Comebacks' and Succession in Southern Africa

Hosted by the Institute for Security Studies (ISS)

Date: Thursday, 7<sup>th</sup> June 2007

### **Chair**

Dr Cheryl Hendricks – Head of Southern Africa Human Security Programme – ISS

### **Speakers:**

Jo-Ansie Van Wyk, Lecturer –Department of Political Studies, UNISA.

Dr Steven Friedman Research associate, IDASA and Visiting Professor of Politics, Rhodes University

Dr David Sebudubudu Senior Lecturer Political and Administrative, University of Botswana

Dr Dennis Kadima, Executive Director, EISA

The seminar brought together 30 participants from academic and research institutions, civil society, government and diplomatic missions. Cheryl Hendricks introduced the topic of debate by stating that the question of leadership has increasingly become critical in Africa especially with the advent of the 'new wave of democratization.' She observed that the first generation leaders emerging from the struggle for independence positioned themselves as the only ones capable of leading and as presidents for life. The shift toward democracy brought about an emphasis on constitutionalism and the entrenchment of term limits. There however have been a number of cases where incumbents and their clients have colluded in an attempt to extend term limits. Cheryl observed that whenever this has failed to work, incumbent presidents then opt to influence the choice of their successor in the hope of retaining some influence in the corridors of power. She however added that there are also cases where sitting presidents have willingly stepped down from power and gave a number of examples in Southern Africa including Nelson Mandela and Joaquim Chissano. One other significant development underscored by Cheryl is the aspect of women assuming high political positions in Southern Africa.

The seminar, she said, was intended to examine a number of issues including; why leadership is important, why it has taken the forms it has, the trends in Southern Africa and their implications, the 'third term' scenario and overall where to direct the focus of analyses on these issues.

The first speaker Jo-Ansie van Wyk made her presentation based on her occasional paper titled *Political leaders in Africa: Presidents, patrons or profiteers?* (2007). She began with a historical overview of the question of political leadership in Africa, outlining some of the significant thematic areas such as the liberation struggle, its legacy, the characterisation of political leadership broadly, the democratisation project, the aspect of personality and the question of upcoming elections in Africa. For Jo-Ansie leadership is important in Africa because it determines the control and distribution power and resources. She characterised political leadership on the continent as an extra-legal contest, often played out on marginal sites beyond the institutionalised regulations in the

Western bureaucratic sense, between elites and the 'others' for power and national resources. That it is for this reason that Africa is characterised by patron-client relationships where leaders act as dispensers of neo-patrimony. The consequence of this is the crisis of the culture of impunity and corruption. To Jo-Ansie the post independent African state was a mere transplant of the colonial state, exemplified by the legacy of the liberation struggle. She argued it is for these reasons that the postcolonial African state has suffered from the triple crisis of governance ie lack of accountability, conflicts and economic crises. The credentials of 'freedom fighters' were/are used to engender personality cults and the continued stay in office (presidents for life). Africa thus witnessed the entrenchment of authoritarian rule.

Today, however, a number of African countries have accommodated the aspect of constitutional term limits although there have been attempts in others to reverse this phenomenon. Jo-Ansie also observed that post independent Africa has also witnessed a continued influence of the traditional kingdom system in countries like South Africa, Sudan, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Botswana, Liberia and post genocide Rwanda where these systems are recognised by the political establishment and in constitutions. Jo-Ansie also examined the phenomena of presidents who have left power attempting to make political comebacks in countries like Zambia, Malawi and Namibia, although she maintained that the democracy project seems to be increasingly entrenched on the continent.

In his presentation, David Sebudubudu argued that the problems associated with leadership are not unique to Africa. He made an illustration of the case of England, which witnessed similar problems in its early development, especially on the question of public office being used by individuals to enrich themselves. Sebudubudu focused on the case of Botswana, which has since its independence in 1976 survived as a multiparty democracy although with one party dominating the political scene. He stated that Botswana has largely been seen as one of the success stories on the continent. He argued that Botswana's success is largely due to its ability to integrate traditional values of consultation, participation and consensus into its democratic experiment, drawn from the Tswana rules governing the succession of chieftaincy. This has ensured smooth leadership succession at party and national levels. According to Sebudubudu, one of the reasons why Botswana has since its independence been different from other African countries is that most of leaders who took office in Botswana at independence were already rich and did not use the public office to enrich themselves. To him, the ruling party BDP has done a lot in terms of development but has been winning successive elections partly aided by the lack of a level playing ground. He also pointed out that Botswana is largely seen as one of the least corrupt countries on the continent. He attributed this perception to the fact that cases of corrupt practices often go unreported.

Among the current issues of concern in Botswana include the question of automatic succession of the president by the vice president. He said that there is increasingly opinion in support direct elections of the president whenever that office falls vacant. He also pointed out that the institution of presidency is vested with a lot of powers with little checks and balances. In conclusion, Sebudubudu observed that leadership and succession

in Botswana have largely been smooth and this has contributed to the current economic development. However, some undemocratic tenets in the current system are increasingly becoming a matter of public concern.

Steven Friedman explored the question whether leadership matters and argued that while it does, it is not in the sense it has been made to appear. He observed that the obsession with the question of leadership constrains a better appreciation of the root causes of Africa's problems. To him, the question to be asked is why leadership is a problem? He observed that leadership is as a result of the nature and consequence of the society and the structure of that society. That most African countries do not have the capacity to bring leaders to account and this to him is the root cause of the problem. The way out, he observed, is to develop countervailing influence by bringing the citizen voice at the forefront. Citizens' action, he observed, has previously been meaningful in Africa but has neither been very organised nor sustainable.

On South Africa Friedman observed that President Thabo Mbeki may not want to continue being the next ANC president but rather to control the next ANC president. He cautioned that any attempts by Mbeki for a third term will not work. On an optimistic note about South Africa, Friedman observed that democracy develops out of tough social contests and the way South African leadership is currently playing out, should be seen as something positive. He concluded that the previous approach of top-down leadership is being challenged by the countervailing forces such as the trade union movement. To him, although the trade union movement may not be liked, it is playing a meaningful role. He emphasized the need to strengthen these countervailing forces in Africa.

The discussant Dennis Kadima revisited some of the key themes in previous presentations and underscored others which had been omitted. He observed that it is important to encompass the question of leadership beyond ruling parties and also focus on opposition groups because they are the 'government in waiting.' He also argued for a critical assessment of the question of term limits. For him, while term limits fortify the issue of accountability, the negative upshot is that it can limit progressive leaders. It can also be a source of concern for young leaders who are required for instance to retire in their forties. He also added that term limits have been applicable largely in presidential and not parliamentary systems.

Kadima also highlighted a number of factors including political violence as major hindrances to the participation of women in political processes. He also pointed out the role of ethnicity in political dynamics in Africa and the strategy by incumbents to use others within the system when maneuvering to extent term extensions. Kadima also underscored the 'international dimension' in African leadership where those who aspire to be leaders have to be acceptable in Western capitals.

During the plenary, a number views and issues were raised.

- The issue of the prevalent use of the term 'democracy' vis a vis its actual absence was raised.

- There was also a concern on what constitutes democracy and whether it is linked to the number of elections in a country.
- On the question of accountability, it was argued that perhaps the reason why most African leaders are not accountable to their citizens, but are instead to foreign powers, is because these leaders draw most of their revenues from these foreign powers and not from citizens.
- Africa was also cautioned against falling prey to foreign agendas.
- Another speaker however pointed out that western governments sometimes intervene in other countries for legitimate reasons to promote their interests.
- The historical legacy of inherited state structures was also pointed out as a contributor to underdevelopment and the lack of an enabling environment for development on the continent.
- The role of Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) in promoting democracy was questioned on the basis that most NGOs on the continent draw their funding from the Western governments creating a dilemma about which/whose democracy they promote.
- There was also a concern on whether changes in the political leadership in South Africa would affect the progress of initiatives such as NEPAD where the country has played a significant role

In response, a number of observations were made.

- That the increased currency in the use of the term democracy is largely because it is seen as being fashionable rather than reflecting the reality.
- It was also pointed out that foreign forces that promote democracy on the African continent are motivated by reasons beyond democracy itself. The examples of Angola and Egypt that largely retain undemocratic structures yet are among the highest beneficiaries of foreign development assistance were cited as examples.
- It was also pointed out that there are sometimes contradictions in policies of countries that ‘export democracy’ yet suffer from democratic credibility themselves.
- But it also acknowledged that the International Community plays a significant role in promoting democracy on the continent.
- African countries were also blamed for sometimes doing little to address their socio-economic and political challenges.
- The phenomena of African leaders drawing funds from the West was said to partly explain why most African leaders are accountable to ‘donor’ countries rather than to their citizens.
- On the question of funding to NGOs, it was observed that it should be a source for concern where the funders and the NGOs pursue agendas that serve themselves rather than the citizens.
- It was also argued that domestic changes in South Africa will certainly bring about a different approach to continental matters

Cheryl Hendricks in her closing remarks observed that NGOs do suffer from the same ills that afflict governments. She augmented the view that African governments have sometimes sat back and wished regional problems away, giving the example of Swaziland and suggested organising a seminar around it