

AFRICA'S POWER ADDICTS

By Hama Tuma

From kola nuts to Kat, from hashish to cocaine the leaders of Africa are confirmed addicts of many leaves and substances. However, their worst addiction is to power and they would destroy the country and the continent as they try to get their fix. Much to the woe of Africa, the addicts get their fix by destroying the continent.

Take the Burundi president. Illegally, he wants to run for a third term and many of his own people just are opposed. Addicted to power and faced with the harsh truth that people do not want him, he did not take the polite road out. He remembers Museveni of Uganda before him, who refused to let go and just clung to power. Burundi may burn but the president will ride roughshod over the people and stay on. Asanti Sana. Amen. Gelleh of Djibouti wants to do the same and he is used to running against himself and winning--he has done it three times before. Old and still in power also defines Mugabe, the bogeyman of the West. Kagame of Rwanda also wants to change the Constitution and to run for a third time. As the cheating West jabbbers about democracy and development in Africa, our true to form dictators have made us proud by trying to resort to their old ways, to tradition as we know it politically for the last many decades. Some fools may even call it afro centrism.

As usual, the West is to blame for the Pierre Nkurunzizas of Africa. Back in the good old days, we had openly and publicly the one party system. A President did not have to submit to a western copy of a presidential term--he was a life president. There were no elections and even if there were everyone knew--as most Ethiopians do--that it was only a charade. The bullet decided the change of power and never the so called ballot box. The CIA and MI6 did not burden us then with so called NGOs, NEDs and other deceptive bodies but came out straight as is: Lumumba, Nkrumah, Moumie, Nyoba, Cabral, Machel (not to mention Mossadegh of Iran and others) and more were their victims and we all knew who were the killers. Times changed and though little of substance did change in Africa the West wanted to trumpet another tune in accord with the changing times. Enter the gibberish about democracy, multiparty systems, elections for presidents and the (still rubber stamp) parliaments, determined terms for the presidency, democratic demagoguery with no substance on the ground in reality. The charade was on, though few Africans took the fiction as true story.

One US president and his curse worthy officials even came up with the label new democratic African leaders to praise the characters in their comedy for Africa. Meles Zenawi (the dead and un lamented dictator), Isaias Afewerki (now being condemned even by the UN as a brutal tyrant). Yoweri Kaguta Museveni (the Nkurunziza of Kampala), and Kagame of Rwanda were the handpicked actors to fit the label. They

were not democratic even by any weak standard but the Clintons and the Rices bent backwards and lied outright to convince us that they were and are. Deby of Chad and Nguema of Equatorial Guinea, despots both, were also hailed as they sold their oil and their countries over to the West. The comedy entailed a document called The Constitution which no one respected as the dictators changing it as they please demonstrated. One--the Eritrean-- has refused to have a constitution altogether and that has not made the ones who adopted one--Ethiopia, Uganda, Djibouti and Rwanda--any more democratic as they all have trampled upon or ignored the so called Constitution. If the West, as it does so often, had not interfered in our strictly African affairs, we would have had no headaches as the ones we see now in Burundi. Presidents would have ruled till they became senile or got ousted by a coup (Habib Bourgiba, Kamuzu Banda, Boigny, Haile Sellasie), the parody of the multi party would end, and Africans would not have had great expectations and even bigger disappointments. After all, we still have ruling parties winning anything from 96% to 100% of the rigged votes and multi party systems that are actually one party ones.

Old age does make some people nostalgic but such a yearning is not the case here. Dreaming of a feast does not tame the pangs of hunger. There was no idyllic golden age of the past (sorry afro centrists) and I for one shun idolizing the old times which were not that attractive either. The new generation has no memory and does not know history and has ended up admiring the very ones who destroyed our countries and the continent as a whole. As we say, they are calling daddy the very person who had killed their own father n managed to marry their mother. The present Africa is not that much better or different than the past one--all the trappings aside. Robber barons exist like old time kleptocrats. Today's democratic despots are yesterday's unabashed and straight foreword dictators. The so called multi party is but in reality the one party state. Alpha Conde is no Sekou Toure but this could today show favorable tilt towards Sekou. Remember Mobutu? What makes Kabila that different? There were Bokassa and Amin and we have now Kabila, Nguema and Bongo. If we cut the BS, as Americans like to say, we shall be Zen with the misery and suffering that continues without let up and much change. The charade of democracy is a burden and that here and there some promising transition manage to appear does not change the overall situation. The slave thinks the chains are gone but he is still enslaved, the illusion of independence and freedom cannot replace their absence.

No wonder then if our dictators, already addicted to a variety of drugs and to the all potent one called absolute power, want to stay in the palace till they are dragged out of it dead or alive (Compaore, Kaddafi, Mubarak, Ben Ali). Addiction to power does not seem to have an effective rehabilitation method. It leads to violence. Burundi is sliding to a civil war that may have ethnic implications. Gelleh of Djibouti is beset by an armed rebellion and Kagame's attempt to change the constitution and stay in power will favor the destabilization of the hapless country. Museveini has clung to power but his hold is more tenuous than ever. In Ethiopia, a repressive and one ethnic based ruling party has won yet another election (almost 100%) but violent overthrow looms over it. What if the fiction of democratic rule had been cast aside and the reality of dictatorship maintained without any makeup and confusing mask? One is pushed to wonder. One political

leader of the past did say make to the majority promises you can never keep to gain their support. However, the promise of free and fair elections, constitutional rule and democracy may placate and dupe for a short while but it creates great expectations and worse still disappointments and may, as often seen in the past, lead to violence. The fate of the Nkurinizas may very well be along this line. In Ethiopia, we have a story of a king who imagined people love him when they applauded him and left his balcony to join the crowd and was trampled to death by the people who actually detested him. A one day reign--never delude yourself that those who hail you really love you. To survive in power, no delusions please. People do not remain fooled and deluded forever. And when they do rise up to say enough, the tyrants should do well to listen and use the opportunity to gracefully withdraw, exit, disappear. Alas, they hardly ever listen. They would rather destroy a country than get rid of their addiction. And their addiction often kills them in the end.

Zuma, Bongo, the king of the Zulus, Kabila, Gelleh, Deby... the list is long. Things have changed in Africa? Do not tell show say those who try to advise writers. But it is a no show all the way. It is a lifelong addiction and the foreign powers that be are the drug cartels, the pushers. Africa is cursed on all angles and grounds and her people are sadly still sleeping, what Senghor called, the great sleep of the Negro. Alas! The addicts of power can be cured only by a revolution.