

Africa Day reflection – Africa’s crisis of leadership and lack of credible institutions

Opinion article by [Dr Sunday Paul C. Onwuegbuchulam](#), [Centre for Gender and Africa Studies](#), University of the Free State

It is once again the month of May and there are many preparations being made for the celebration of Africa Day. I do not believe in or subscribe to the logic of having a specified day or month to celebrate Africa. But importantly, the present state of the socio-political and economic landscape of Africa leaves nothing to celebrate. It still baffles me that there is notable hype surrounding this so-called Africa Day celebration, especially considering the state of decay in the continent. I am aware I sound rather negative, but this is how I feel about the continent which almost 1.3 billion people, including myself, call home. There are several issues that we can talk about that go to ascertain that there is indeed nothing to celebrate today in Africa but the fact is we should rather be mourning. My focus is on the crisis of leadership and the weak institutions in most African countries.

I am not saying that Africa has not made progress after the years of slavery and colonialism meted on the continent. No, I am sure that good stories are coming out of some African countries, seen in different forms of development, strong institutions and credible leadership in the said countries. Botswana offers a good case in point, as it is a country that has used its diamond resources to develop itself and its citizens. Arguably, Botswana’s success story can only be credited to the availability of strong institutions and leadership which considers the interest of the country and the wellbeing of the people as a priority. Perhaps another good story coming from Africa is the way South Africa, and indeed some other African countries, have dealt with the issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is said that Africa, with close to 17% of the world’s population, came out rather ‘okay’ with regards to not bearing the brunt of the negative impact of the pandemic. This can also be attributed to some good leadership, especially as seen in South Africa, which, though not perfect, debatably helped to minimise the impact of COVID in the country. It is also true that some African countries were not honest in reporting the levels of infections and some were in denial of the pandemic, which in itself led to the deaths of many including some among the political class in these countries.

Problematic leadership

Let me then talk about the issue of problematic leadership in Africa which has left the continent on its knees: today most African countries suffer from the problem of having inept and morally bankrupt leaders. South Africa is currently still going through the state capture saga playing out at the Zondo commission. The stories emerging from that commission, if true, point to a growing

culture of corruption and sleaze that needs to be addressed, if South Africa will avoid becoming like other African countries ruined by the corruption phenomenon. Nigeria as a case in point is battling systemic corruption which has eaten deep into the socio-political and economic fabric of the country. Nigeria's fight against corruption has become a losing battle with the current president, Muhammadu Buhari, obviously inept in dealing with the syndrome. Buhari coming into power in 2015 made several assurances that he would fight corruption and insecurity in the country. A few years into the second term of that administration, it can be said Nigeria is worse than Buhari found it. Corruption, insecurity and economic hardship have left Nigerians dazed and the assertion in some circles is that the Buhari campaign was the greatest fraud on Nigerians since its independence.

Nigeria's case perhaps offers a basis for the analysis of the crisis of leadership and weak institutions in African countries. Africa's mostly ageing ruling class has failed African countries as a result of their power hunger, blatant ineptitude and lack of moral and political will to establish strong institutions. On these, it will seem that some African politicians are yet to learn what democracy and respect for the will of the people are all about. We have African presidents changing their constitutions to stay longer in office. There has been a history of this phenomenon in many African countries. For example, Djibouti, with president [Ismail Omar Guelleh](#) in 1999; Chad with president Idriss Déby in 2005; Cameroon with president [Paul Biya](#) in 2008 who has now stayed in office for close to 39 years; Zimbabwe with the late [Robert Mugabe](#) in 2013; Congo Brazzaville with president [Denis Sassou Nguesso](#) in 2016; 2017 in Rwanda with president [Paul Kagame](#), who has now stayed in office 21 years and counting; Uganda in 2005 under [Yoweri Museveni](#) with the supreme court quashing the age limit for the president, thereby allowing Museveni to contest the 2021 elections. The case of Uganda's Museveni is perhaps the one that warrants dwelling on. The man is being sworn in for the sixth time as president of Uganda amidst claims of a rigged election. Events leading up to and during the said election leaves one with little to write home about, with reported widespread intimidation of opposition party supporters, shutting off the internet and all sorts of electoral abuses which are callously engineered to steal the people's mandate. It is pathetic to hear Museveni always tout "democratically elected" in answer to any question which seems to suggest that he is now a dictator after having ousted one (Idi Amin).

One interesting thing that emerges in the discussion of African leaders wanting to stay in office longer than they should is their rebuttal that democracy in Africa should not be seen as democracy as obtained elsewhere in the world – the US for instance, where a president has only two terms of four years each. African presidents see themselves and indeed democracy in Africa as incommensurate with that in Europe and the West. Hence it is not susceptible to being measured by the standards of democracy in other parts of the world. In their view, democracy is not perfect anywhere, therefore they need the world to leave them alone to practise the understanding of democracy as they see it. It is interesting to hear some politicians disingenuously use as an example the [Trump saga](#) in the US and his refusal to acknowledge defeat in an election – to buttress their point about democracy not being perfect anywhere. On this, it will seem to me that these African leaders fail to understand that Trump's case was just what the philosopher JJC Smart called a nomological dangler. Trump's case is a nomological dangler because it was outside of the norm in the history of relatively successful American democracy, which perhaps has become the archetype of democracy in the modern world. It is sadder to see how these politicians use the Trump case as a basis to justify their incessant craving for power and their wish to die in office. It would seem that some African leaders have

converted monarchical rule to what they call democracy. A feature of democracy is the choosing and replacing of representatives through a free and fair election. This presupposes a limited time in the office of a representative, who then is replaced through a free and fair election. Democracy is then not a monarchy in which leaders die in office and or abdicate because of some reasons. Notably, in the case of African politicians, they do not leave office even when they are incapacitated by health issues. Take the recent case of [Ali Bongo](#) of Gabon.

Live liyengcayelwa

Africa is really in trouble if this trend in leadership continues. Africa cannot progress when politicians in different countries think they are the best the country can produce to lead. African politicians should learn to stay their time in office and leave when it is time, handing over to successors who will continue where they stopped and move their countries forward. Elections and the will of the people should be allowed to reign and politicians should stop the pogrom meted out on the will of the people. This needs strong institutions which are lacking in most African countries and this is because in most cases these morally bankrupt and inept politicians have rendered these institutions useless in their countries. It is a sad issue and one which needs to be corrected if Africa and African countries will have anything good to celebrate.

A very important African ethos is vital for us to begin to solve our problems and that is *live liyengcayelwa*. *Live liyengcayelwa* is an isiSwati saying that admonishes respect for the land and the people. This is what I am proposing to African politicians – that they learn to respect the land and the people. They do this by accepting when their time in office is up and leave peacefully. They should learn to establish strong institutions which will help in stabilising true democracy and achieving proper development in African countries. Through these, we might perhaps have a true cause to celebrate Africa.

Photo caption:

Dr Sunday Paul C Onwuegbuchulam is from the Centre for Gender and Africa Studies, University of the Free State (UFS) who writes that African politicians must learn to respect the land and the people.

Social media Blurb:

#AfricaDay: The present state of the socio-political and economic landscape of Africa leaves nothing to celebrate. It still baffles me that there is notable hype surrounding this celebration, especially considering the state of decay on the continent, writes Dr Onwuegbuchulam.