

Speech by Prof. Rok Ajulu at the Kenya Alliance of Resident Associations (KARA) Bi-monthly Talk Series held on 8th March 2010 at the Panafric Hotel, Nairobi.

The Contribution of Political Coalitions and Political Alliances to Democratic Consolidation in Africa: The case of the ANC, SACP, and COSATU in South Africa.

The Ideal of democratic Consolidation

- The concept of democratic consolidation has its origins in the studies of transitions from authoritarian to democratic rule particularly in Latin America. The concept itself is not without its own baggage of intellectual controversies.
- For example, the discourse around democratic consolidation sounds more like a set of observations, an inventory of circumstances that correlated with the transition from authoritarian to democratic regimes in Huntington's third wave in Latin America. Second, in the context of sub-Saharan Africa, there is an implicit assumption that multiparty system equals consolidation of democracy, and that all that needs to be done is the consolidation of these electoral processes.
- It is therefore important to provide a working definition of democratic consolidation. In my opinion, an appropriate definition of democratic consolidation would refer to the legitimation and institutionalization of political and economic activity. That is, the extent to which a political system and economic activity has achieved political stability, and its institutions have achieved legitimacy within wide sections of the society. In other words, consolidation assumes the acceptance of political institutions as the legitimate framework of contestation of political power. Thus it should be obvious that democratic consolidation refers to the gradual processes of opening, consolidating and deepening of democratic space. That is, the freedom to hold and express views and to engage in political activity without government interference.
- It must be emphasized that democratic consolidation is not necessarily synonymous with electoral democracy. It is quite possible to have regular elections without necessarily achieving the consolidation of democratic space. The experience of the African continent over the past two decades attests to this.
- Authoritarian leaders very quickly mastered the art of subverting the "redemocratisation" wave of the 1980s and early 90s. Thus, while they have been able to conduct regular elections, these elections have been neither free nor fair. And while opposition parties have been legalised, they have been subjected to all kinds of destabilisation tactics as to render them ineffective. And where all these tactics have failed, authoritarian leaders have not hesitated to falsify the results. Kenya and Zimbabwe are the more recent examples.
- Finally, it is equally important to emphasize that democratic consolidation is a continuing process which depends very much on prevailing historical circumstances. Very broadly, it can be argued that the telling signs of democratic consolidation are the gradual acceptance by ordinary citizens of the bona fides of political institutions and the recognition of them as the only legitimate institutions for conducting political activities.

The idea of democracy

More often than not, when we talk of democracy in the post -colonial societies we often mean liberal democracy. What is this animal called liberal democracy?

- The main pillar of liberal democracy is what Linz has called the self enforcing restraint on the exercise of power. That a regime can be considered as Liberal and democratic when it allows for the free formation of political preferences, through the use of basic freedom of

association, information, and communication for the purposes of free competition for political power.

- The condition necessary for liberal democracy and democratic governance may be said to depend on four key elements as follows:
- Accountability by those who exercise power to the citizenry;
- A system of checks and balances in exercise of government;
- A guarantee civil and political liberties and right for every citizen;
- A set of procedures and institutions that allow the contestation over power in free and fair elections.

In his seminal essay on the idea of the modern state, Stuart Hall argues that a state of the type described above, in which:

- Power is shared,
- Rights to participate in government are legally and constitutionally defined,
- Representation was widened
- State power fully secular and is subjected to law- the rule of law,
- And the boundaries of national sovereignty are clearly defined,

Had emerged rather unevenly in Europe, first in Britain and gradually into the continent towards the end of 19th century.

- This form of state, he argues, was the product of demands of the rising classes associated with the transition to industrial capitalism towards the end of the 17th century in Britain. The new classes needed a form of state freed from the rigidities of ancient regime, a state which could guarantee property rights.
- But more importantly, Hall points out that the liberal state was not a democracy. The majority of the citizens, he points out, did not have the vote, could not assemble as they chose, join trade unions, hold government positions if they were dissenters, or dispose of their property if they were women. It was only after the struggles of the working classes to win political and civil rights throughout the 19th and the early part of the 20th century that democracy was finally grafted on to the liberal state to create the *liberal democratic state*.
- Thus the idea of liberal democracy therefore is not something which was created from outside of society. Beetham, in the same volume argues ***that liberal democracy is a historical product, not a fact of nature. It was a historical phenomenon, emerging out of a concrete historical setting, the conjuncture of industrial revolution and capitalist accumulation in Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries.***
- Put differently, liberal democracy was a product of historical struggles as different class forces competed to deepen the democratic content of the classical liberal state. As Hall points out, it was the struggles for civil and political rights throughout the 19th and 20th century Britain, which substantially modified the liberal state, deepening its popular base and its democratic content.
- It is this idea of democracy as a product of historical struggles which appeals to me in my attempt to understand whether political coalitions and political alliances can indeed contribute to democratic consolidation. For me the most important factor is that political processes do not exist in a vacuum. They operate within existing historical processes and are largely influenced by existing political culture. Democratization or its consolidation is not something that cannot be imposed from without a society; it can only be understood in the context of concrete historical moments.
- It is against this background that a discussion of the South African tripartite alliance between the African National Congress (ANC), The South African Communist Party

(SACP), and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) can make any contribution to our understanding of the subject.

The ANC, SACP, COSATU, the South African case

- The five year 'war of attrition' around succession in the leadership of the African National Congress (ANC), the ruling party in South Africa, a contestation which led to the defeat of the incumbent, president Thabo Mbeki, at the ANC congress in December 2007, and ultimately his dismissal as head of state by the new ANC leadership placed the continued consolidation of South Africa's democracy squarely on the debate.
- In many quarters inside South Africa, the reassertion of the centrality of the tripartite alliance as the main centre of power by the Post Polokwane block has provoked a series of negative commentary about the future of democracy in South Africa. It is against this background that it is interesting to tease out this debate.
- The ANC has an exceptional political tradition in the continent. In two years time it will be celebrating its centenary, making it the oldest political formation in the continent. At the time of political independence in 1994, the ANC had accumulated a vast experience in the culture and traditions of political organization which more or less cushioned it from the culture of political fracturing that was to be witnessed in the majority of the countries in the continent.
- Basically the long history of the ANC and its traditions and culture of political organization can be divided into four main periods.
- The first period, 1912 - 1940 was characterized by conservatism and what others have described as elitism.
- The second period from 1946 marked the transformation of the ANC into a mass militant political organization. The shift in the balance of forces within the ANC was brought about by the entry of the working class as an organized political force onto the political terrain. The most important players here were the organised working class, which later was to gather under the umbrella of the South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) the predecessor to COSATU, and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) later to change its name to South African Communist Party following the banning in 1960.
- The most important influence during this period was the great African mineworker's strike of 1946. At its height, the strike involved about 100 000 miners, the majority of them migrants. Not surprisingly, one of the immediate outcomes of the strike was the convergence of interests between the ANC, the trade union movement and the Communist Party, whose leadership were active in the ANC and the trade union movement. It also about the same time that the ANC Youth League came into being. These new forces helped propel the ANC into a new direction of popular mass action.
- The third period from 1949 to 1961 (Sharpeville) was the period of defiance and new strategies. This period saw the ANC unveil new strategies of popular mass action - the Defiance campaign of 1952, and Congress of the People which adopted the Freedom Charter in 1955. This was the period of the Treason Trial and of direct mass action. Throughout this period, the three organisations worked together in their common programmes in their struggle against apartheid.
- Thus it is important to emphasize that the South African Alliance was not brought together by some declaration from some political conference, rather this were organizations were brought together through their experience in the battles against a common colonial enemy. Their policy outlook, their political strategies, and their traditions of political organizations were largely framed by their experiences in those struggles.

- In 1961 following the Sharpeville massacre, the ANC and all other African political organizations. The banning did not amputate the tradition of political organisations and struggle which had been established over the previous fifty years. Rather the ANC went underground and by the end of 1961, launched its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe popularly known as the MK, and three decades later was to return to the country as a powerful political force to contend with.
- The fourth period from the 1961 is that of the ANC in exile. The exile period can be said to have played an equally important part in the political culture of the ANC. It broadened its political outlook, infusing in the ANC a more nuanced understanding of the international context of the struggle against apartheid. More importantly, this period enabled the ANC to concretise the broad alliance of the liberation movement and to sharpen its strategies. The 'four pillars' of the struggle was a product of this period. As with all liberation movements, this period witnessed a centralisation of power within the ANC, but the democratic culture nonetheless survived.
- The second important, aspect of South African political topography was the development of capitalism and rapid industrialization during the first three decades of the last century, and the growth on that basis of permanent proletarianization and urbanization. This in turn gave birth to trade unionism which as we have seen above was quite instrumental in radicalising the ANC.
- However the most important role of the trade union movement in South Africa was not only its ability to survive years of repression, but equally its ability to create a political and legal space of their own. Throughout the 1960s trade unions struggled to survive amidst intense and administratively driven justice. As proletarianization and urbanization continued South Africa found itself in completely changed world at the beginning of the 1970s. The Durban strikes which gave birth to the 'new' unions shifted the paradigm of resistance to internal players, but more importantly, inculcated the construction of a new political culture of democratic ownership of the trade union movement. It is the developments within the trade union movement, beginning from 1973 in the mid 1980s which gave birth to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) a successor to SACTU in the Tripartite Alliance
- The final aspect of the South African political topography is the emergence of the civil space in the 1980s. The 1980s can be truly declared the decade of civil society. As the apartheid state started showing signs of losing control, the people went onto the offensive. Throughout the country, popular organizations evolved not only among the working people, but the youths, student movements, cultural and rural based organizations.
- The unity of these disparate organizations was to find expression in the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Mass Democratic movement (MDM). Although part of the broad liberation as seen through its support of the main symbols of the struggle - Freedom Charter and the release of Mandela Campaign, these were not strictly ANC organizations. They were part of the ANC led liberation struggle but with a momentum of their own.
- More importantly, the most visible trade-mark of the numerous civic organizations was their democratic culture. One testimony of the strength of these organizations was their resilience in sustaining urban uprising throughout the 1980s, which ultimately shifted the paradigm of the struggle from armed struggle to popular uprising. Thus unlike the experience of liberation struggles in the rest of the continent, the strength of the civil society in South Africa shifted the centre of the gravity of the struggle to the urban areas, and confronted the liberation movement at the time of the negotiations with a strong democratic culture.
- From the above discussion of the South Africa case, we can identify three broad strands of traditions of political struggle.

- The first, the ANC/SACP/SACTU alliance which as we have indicated, had by the time of the unbanning of the political organizations in 1990, accumulated a vast experience and traditions of political organization.
- The second, the trade union movement, particularly the post 1970 trade unionism, which had by 1985 formed a strong federation, Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) with vibrant democratic traditions.
- And finally the civic movement which had similarly entrenched its own democratic traditions. These three different traditions of democratic organizations would be crucial in determining the outcome of a negotiated settlement come the negotiations.
- It is these three broad strands of political struggle that was to define the democratic outcome of South Africa' negotiated settlement, and continues to shape the democratic content of their transition. It is therefore possible to argue that that South African case is one in which the Tripartite Alliance, a product of a conjuncture of historical experience has served to deepen rather than weaken democratic traditions, and is thus likely to create an environment in which democracy may be consolidated.
- In my opinion, the ANC succession was a clear demonstration of democratic traditions of that party. Where else in the continent has a ruling party had the guts to recall a president? This conclusion however must be tempered by the fact that South Africa remains a very unequal society, and its Achilles heel remains the increasing numbers of the poor and the unemployed who have yet to taste the real fruits of Uhuru. This grinding poverty of the majority of black South Africans, and the widening disparity in wealth between white and black does constitute a potential danger for the delegitimation of political institutions.

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