

Sit-Tight Presidents Syndrome: A Changing African Past

Babafemi A. Badejo, Ph. D

With independence realized from colonial rule, Africa had its fair share of sit-tight Presidents. The continent started off with one-party states that knew only one leader who satisfied demands for elections but making sure that these “African Kings” regularly and purportedly scored over 90% of votes cast. Then came a spate of “African Kings in military uniforms” who equally stayed put in power and died in office and were succeeded by their sons or carefully chosen loyalist. Of course, there were those who had mother luck smile on them and acquired power against all odds like Daniel arap Moi but who in turn stayed put only to be eventually swept aside by historical pressures towards democratization given the push for multi-partyism.

It is important to quickly note that multi-partyism is not necessarily a panacea for democracy. Neither are sham elections. Though this debate is for another day, it is enough to state that the foundation for genuine democratic governance must be the democratization of the material base of society, that is, access to production assets. When an elite steals, pockets and controls the economy there can be no realization of democracy in governance. After all, it was possible for Mobutu Sese Seko with much of the national wealth in his pocket, to get relations and loyalists to form political parties and hired these to engage in a pretentious game of fair electoral competition. He was able to sit-tight in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo), like African Kings of yore until Laurent Kabila succeeded in sweeping him out of office by force. He went into a lonely death in exile as Europeans pocketed most of the wealth of his country that he had looted. Laurent Kabila did not last long only for Joseph Kabila to succeed his father. Whether he would be succeeded is yet to be seen.

Given such a sit-tight at all cost trend, it is not a surprise that many Africans disenfranchise themselves on the basis of the wrong perception they have to the effect that voting can never bring change in the presidency of their respective countries. Put another way, an incumbent President cannot be voted out of office. Power of incumbency which includes diversion of state material wealth into a campaign, use of security forces, electoral bodies and the judiciary etc., into a structured rigging of an election makes voting in African elections mere window dressing.

However, it is important to note and stress that such a negative perception with respect to realizing change in the state house through elections is a changing reality in Africa. In effect, sit-tight incumbents are being dislodged in Africa. Self-succession is no longer the exclusive preferred option. There have been celebrated cases in which incumbent governments in power were defeated, even with ridiculous landslide margins. In fact, there have been about twenty of such cases scattered all over the various regions and states in Africa. More important though is the fact that internal and external realities are rapidly expanding the number of cases.

Peaceful Turn-over of Power Cases

Somalia would be the first case in post-Independence Africa in which an incumbent government was ousted through elections. This happened in the 1967 presidential election, the second election after Somali independence in July 1, 1960. The very first president who was also the sitting president, Aden Abdullah Daar of the Somali Youth League was defeated by his former Prime Minister who became a major opposition, in the same party, Abdirashid Ali Shermake. The defeated incumbent leader peacefully ceded power, and the newly elected President was sworn on June 10, 1967.

The year 1991 was significant for multiparty elections in Africa. The first example was that of Benin Republic that had experienced a number of military coups at a time when military rule was fashionable in Africa. In 1972, Mathieu Kerekou had successfully carried out his own coup d'état. He changed the name of the country from Dahomey into Benin, and transmuted himself into an elected President. With hardships on the economic front, Kerekou was forced to accept a sovereign national conference that Nicephore Soglo, an international civil servant had led as an acting Prime Minister under President Kerekou. The sovereign national conference produced a constitution that was approved by the people in a referendum on December 2, 1990. This paved way for multiparty elections at which Soglo defeated incumbent Kerekou who ceded power and Soglo was sworn into a five year presidency on 4 April 1991. This marked the first time an opposition leader took over power from an incumbent in francophone Africa. Kerekou, with the support of Nigeria, returned to power on April 4, 1996 having won the presidential elections that year against incumbent President Soglo. Soglo equally ceded power without much cacophony.

Kenneth Kaunda would go down in history as scoring a number of important firsts in Zambia's history. He had led the struggle of Northern Rhodesia for Independence and assumed power in 1964 changing the name of the country into Zambia which was coined from the huge Zambezi river that provided the waters for one of the natural wonders of the world – Lake Victoria. Uncle Kenneth Kaunda's United National Independence Party (UNIP) became the only party in Zambia after he consolidated his hold on power post a multiparty election in 1968. His authoritarian rule was subsequently resisted until he agreed to a multiparty election in 1991. He decided to lead his party in that election contrary to the brotherly advice from Mwalimu Julius Nyerere of Tanzania who had earlier agreed that 27 years was too long to sit-tight in power in either Tanzania or Zambia. In the general elections held on October 31, 1991, Trade Union leader Frederick Chiluba, leading the Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD), convincingly defeated President K.K. It was a mark of great courage when Uncle K.K. ceded power and became the first Anglophone incumbent to be removed from office by an opposition leader.

Since the three major African examples above, there have been quite a number of instances of peaceful displacement of incumbent President. Senegalese Abdou Diouf who had succeeded

President Leopold Sedar Senghor on January 1, 1981 as the former resigned in favour of the latter before the 1983 elections. Diouf won the 1983 elections and repeated the performance in 1988 and 1993. In the presidential contest of the year 2000, he accepted his defeat without violence and allowed opposition leader Abdoulaye Wade to take over the affairs of Senegal on April 1, 2000. Wade had a successful first term of seven years during which he realized reforms including constitutionally reducing the presidential term of office to five years by reversing the change Diouf had made in 1991. He easily won a second term of office and succeeded himself as President in 2007. However, he did not read the handwriting on the wall and was removed through elections by Macky Sall who led a united opposition in 2012. Wade was seen as enjoying the support of the security forces. But he did not seek their help and so, the reputed professionalism of the Senegalese military was not put to test. He ceded power within the constitution.

A number of other dethroning of “African Kings” through elections followed similar paths as those of Somalia, Benin, Zambia and Senegal. For instance, in Madagascar, Didier Ratsiraka was defeated by Alfred Zafy who became President in March 1993. In the follow-up elections in late 1996, it was Zafy’s turn to drink his own potion of defeat. Though he complained about elections being rigged against him, he stated that he was leaving to allow peace to reign. Joyce Banda, as incumbent President in Malawi had gone a bit further than Zafy did in Madagascar. She had been Vice-President of Bingu wa Mutharika and when Bingu died unexpectedly the efforts to prevent her from assuming office failed. However, she lost the ruling party and formed hers for the presidential elections in 2014. She lost the elections to Peter Mutharika, Bingu’s brother. She, tried to nullify the elections but failed. She let go but refused to attend her successor’s swearing-in ceremony sulking that she had been robbed. Nonetheless, she did not resort to violence as Laurent Gbagbo did in Cote D’Ivoire.

Conflictual

Turn-Overs

Laurent Gbagbo had acquired power in a contest with incumbent military ruler who had wanted to transform himself into a civilian ruler. General Robert Guei had disqualified Henri Konan Bedie and Alhassane Ouattara, the more popular candidates with the hope that Laurent Gbagbo would give him a semblance of a contest he had hoped he would win during the October 22, 2000 presidential election. But Gbagbo won. Guei tried to alter that fact but street protests drove sit-tight Guei into exile. It was Gbagbo’s turn to sit-tight after the second round of presidential elections on November 28, 2010. He would not accept his defeat by his long-time rival Alassane Ouattara. His decision to use the Constitutional Council to alter the Ivorian Electoral Commission’s verdict that held that Alhassane had won the elections did not go down well with international observers, Economic Commission of West African States (ECOWAS), the African Union (AU) and particularly, the UN that had agreed to accompany the Ivorians on the electoral process more or less as a final arbiter. The civil war that ensued resulted in the loss of many lives and wanton destruction of properties. In the end it took the Force Nouvelle and other Ouattara supporters, UN peacekeepers

who were in-situ, supported by the French troops to arrest Laurent Gbagbo and his wife on April 11, 2011 and exported him to The Hague for trial at the International Criminal Court while his wife was tried locally.

The long term Gambian dictator Yahya Jammeh, followed a similar path to that of Laurent Gbagbo. After 22 years in office, Yahya Jammeh lost his fifth re-election bid to an opposition alliance led by Adama Barrow who polled 263,515 votes as against President Jammeh's 212,099. Jammeh had earlier conceded defeat even as the results were being announced but subsequently changed his mind and refused to cede power or leave office, citing "serious and unacceptable abnormalities" in the electoral process. The head of the Gambian electoral commission stood solidly by the results that had been declared and went into hiding. ECOWAS, with support from the AU and the UN Security Council insisted on the need for Jammeh to vacate office. As ECOWAS started deploying into Gambia after fruitless diplomatic efforts, Yahya Jammeh proceeded on exile. So, Barrow who had been sworn into office at the Gambian Embassy in Senegal triumphantly returned to Banjul.

Concessionary

Turn-Overs

Before the development in Gambia, the most populous African country, Nigeria and Ghana had shown positive examples on avoidance of the sit-tight syndrome by "African Kings". On March 28-29, 2015, presidential and national legislative elections were held in Nigeria. The incumbent, President Goodluck Jonathan had locked horns with Muhammadu Buhari who was making his fourth attempt in trying to become President of his country. As the counting of votes progressed on March 31, President Jonathan shocked his nation and the world when he called his opponent and conceded defeat to the chagrin of his hardcore supporters who were not bothered about whether lives and properties were lost once they could sit-tight in power and continue with their free for all corruption. There is no doubt that this act saved many lives and properties. The head of the Independent National Electoral Commission at the time in Nigeria, Prof. Attahiru Jega received a lot of kudos for being very steadfast in ensuring a free and fair election.

A similar situation to that of Nigeria was subsequently experienced in Ghana. On December 7, 2016, Ghanaians went to the polls to elect a President and Parliament. In the presidential race, the choice was between incumbent John Dramani Mahama of the National Democratic Congress who was seeking a re-election and veteran politician, Nana Akufo-Addo of the National Patriotic Party who had been a colourful Ghanaian Foreign Minister who was making his third bid for the Presidency. About an hour before the electoral commission could confirm the outcome of the elections, President Mahama conceded his defeat.

Conclusion

Many other dethronements of incumbent African Presidents, for the sake of brevity, were not explored in this account. For instance, Didier Ratsiraka was taken out by Marc Ravalomanana in

Madagascar just as Pierre Buyoya, in spite of his incumbency, was removed by Melchior Ndadaye in Burundi. However, the point is abundantly made to the effect that African voters need not continue to disenfranchise themselves by fearing that incumbent Presidents never lose elections in Africa. History, (in many cases on this continent), shows they do and will continue to lose in as much as principled, great, fiercely independently minded men and women of history, make up electoral commissions and/or voters are ready to be daring and when necessary overwhelmingly express their will thereby eliciting concessions of defeat as votes are being tallied or wait as an incumbent willfully cede power or forced by national/international powers (as twice done in West Africa) show sit-tight presidents the way out of State House. Africa is doing away with external intervention in “internal affairs” as sacrilege there-by running sit-tight incumbents into exile.