Post-liberal politics in East Africa: the tickbird and the rhino

The tickbird

The opening quotation hints that democratic politics in East Africa, as elsewhere, is about the capacity of the state not only to manage elections, competing parties, and constitutional rules; it is also about delivering ‘magic’: i.e. jobs, livelihoods, infrastructure, services, and social safety nets. East African experiences suggest that political reforms require material improvements. For genuine democracy, socio-economic ‘magic’ may be essential. In façade democracies, elections are stage-managed, and media freedoms severely restricted.

Former Tanzanian President Nyerere warned about belief in the magical powers of ‘big men’. Leaders use various forms of ‘belly politics’, sharing resources. But when they fail to deliver, this can also mean their downfall. In his Leadership Code, Nyerere proposed: ‘Leaders must set a good example to the rest of the people in their lives and in all their activities’.¹ He continues to explain:

*Our policy is to make haste slowly, but it may be hard to sell this to the people. Freedom to many means immediate betterment, as if by magic. We are not magicians. But unless I can meet at least some of these aspirations, my support will wane and my head will roll just as surely as the tickbird follows the rhino.*²

Presidential tricks

In 2006, all East African countries except Uganda stuck to their constitutional provisions and limited the President to no more than two terms in office.³ Prospects for genuine democratic transition looked reasonable. By 2018, just Kenya and Tanzania had stuck to two-term Constitutional provisions. Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi had all seen changes in the Constitution allowing multiple – and even indefinite – Presidential terms.⁴ This situation was worrying, since: ‘imposition of presidential term limits…may be the most important indicator of how entrenched constitutionalism has become…on a continent notorious for…’presidents-for-life’”.⁵

Already at independence, Amilcar Cabral warned that new regimes used a ‘bag of tricks’ to stay in power: ‘gerontocracy, nepotism, social inferiority of women, rites and practices…incompatible with the rational and national character of the struggle’ for independence.⁶ During the 1990s, of 18 African Presidents who completed two terms in office, only eight stood down voluntarily. Ten changed the rules and stood again, or appointed loyal proxies.⁷
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