Perspectives on an ethics of power sharing in Africa

Cornel W du Toit
Research Institute for Theology and Religion,
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

The link between African elections and power sharing deals

Many elections in Africa’s young democracies are still marked by controversy. Often the victorious party is accused of corruption and election fraud, the outcome is refuted, there is a stalemate. The peaceful way out is via the negotiation table and an attempt to thrash out some kind of power sharing deal. Having an election is easy. The problem comes when the result is not accepted and it becomes a matter of time before violence erupts or governments are toppled. Elections and power sharing agreements appear to be inescapably linked. One cannot avoid the impression that many elections expose the underlying tensions, divisions and dissent in African democracies. Are these attributable to diversity, ethnicity, nepotism, oppression, dissatisfaction with the form of government? Do some African countries merely accept democratic government because it favours a numerically preponderant group? These issues are examined by focusing on power sharing in Africa and the ethics (if any) underlying it. The assumption is that an elected government is committed to a numerically dominant group and to privileging that group.

Thus power sharing is dialectically linked with elections and the question of justice. As a rule power sharing only appears on a government’s agenda under some form of pressure: armed struggle (guerrilla fighters), the possibility of a coup, opposition pressure, civil disobedience and protest marches, media pressure, regional political pressure (AU, African development communities like SADC), and foreign pressure (including sanctions). Such duress, in whatever form, is undeniably the evolutionary motive for political and other change. Without it there would have been no development from one-party government to representative democracy. As long as the disadvantaged are not empowered to exercise pressure unjust government structures will prevail. That seems to be the pattern of African governments. The mechanism of negotiation is invoked when it becomes apparent that business cannot proceed as usual and negotiation appears to be the best option. From this one infers that fairness and justice are not the foundation of government but concessions made under protest and pressure. Ethics (political justice) is therefore not the basis of (government) power but a product of prolonged struggle. That is the focus of the present paper.

If the 21st century is to be the age of Africa, taken to mean the age of Africa’s Renaissance, then it will certainly have to be a tale of successful power sharing. Unless a culture of fair elections and fair power sharing deals is established, Africa’s development is foredoomed. Successful power sharing between opposing groups in African countries and effective involvement by African regional councils, the African Union (AU) and the like are preconditions to realise the dream of a united Africa. Of course, Africa is not the only continent where regional conflicts erupt regularly. It is not tautologous to say that conflict usually relates to transitional processes. One thinks of the wars that preceded the birth of European states, regional conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and African conflicts associated with the postcolonial era. In other words, conflict is not typical of the continent’s entire history. It is a growth process triggered by a particular historical event.

The history of democracy in Africa (and elsewhere) cannot be viewed in isolation. Nor can one advance abstract ideas about the kind of ethics that ought to underpin power sharing without considering the specific context. It would be absurd to expect fair elections in African countries if the country and the groups involved are trapped in a situation where ethical values such as those contained in human rights simply do not exist. Hence the article will deal with such real forces as the operation of power, economic power and the like. The approach is not to propound ethical ideals as a solution to fair elections and the problems of power sharing, and certainly not to moralise about these. Indeed, there are ample grounds for scepticism about the notion that ethics plays any role in democracies. In our context an ethics of power is

---

1 Classical recent examples are Northern Ireland, Bougainville (the largest island in the Solomon Islands archipelago in Melanesia), Southern Philippines, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia and Moldova. For an authoritative recent discussion, see Weller & Metzger 2008: 59ff; 125ff; 161ff; 193ff; 243ff; 265ff; 307ff.
a square circle. It seems that the only ethics those in power know is an ethics of self-preservation and survival. Usually they negotiate only when their power is threatened to the extent that the only options are: negotiate or abdicate. The success of negotiations depends on the pressure put on the wielder of power to negotiate and the cost of refusal to share power. They would rather share power than lose it altogether. Naturally any form of power sharing implies loss of power. Often power sharing is preceded by bloodshed and devastation of human lives, the economy and infrastructure. Revolutions rarely leave scope for power sharing – they simply get rid of the remains of past institutions. It is exceptional for power to be handed over without bloodshed or prior struggle, be it rhetorical or physical.

Ideally value systems should be imposed ‘from below’ (and that is not confined to a cross on a ballot paper). What is needed is a culture of human rights, anti-corruption, freedom and democracy that is shared by the majority of interest groups. Only then can free and fair elections be expected. But we know only too well that in situations of extreme poverty, inadequate schooling and health services, poor infrastructure, inequality and absence of democracy it would be unrealistic to expect such a culture and value systems, let alone their enforcement, to emanate spontaneously from below. In a nutshell: elections and power sharing in Africa are problematic mainly because the power (resources) to be shared is too little. This is concomitant with a lack of developmental expertise and will, as well as incapacity to apply financial resources effectively. There is simply not enough capital and infrastructure to extend the benefits stipulated in bills of basic human rights to the popular masses. That is why minorities and disempowered groups are usually marginalised. The rights of a minority group, for instance, are not unimportant because they are few. They are important, because individual rights are important, and if a number of individuals constitute a majority it gives them no right to discriminate against members of minority groups. Hence the entrenchment of individual human rights in a constitution and a bill of rights is a cornerstone of any democracy. Africa’s ethnic, cultural and religious diversity inevitably puts the issue of minority rights on the agenda.

It seems unlikely that ethical guidelines will be imposed by African societies exclusively ‘from below’, as the Zimbabwean case demonstrates. Such guidelines have to be offered in tandem with initiatives ‘from above’ or ‘from outside’. These are principles entrenched in a constitution as part of a democratic order; spelled out in international human rights; set by international monetary agencies and umbrella bodies like the United Nations and the African Union; required by regional bodies like ECOWAS and SADC (Southern African Development Community); proclaimed by the media, et cetera. But experience has taught us that even initiatives ‘from above’ have limited impact and usually evoke criticism.

In this article ethics is viewed in terms of the ‘human condition’ (which is in part biologically determined) as well as actual African circumstances. This entails linking our knowledge of conflict with our knowledge of human biology: the human condition of selfishness and self-interest resulting from desire and concomitant comparison with others; survival impulses and self-protection; a perennial sense of unfulfilment, combined with the experience of scarcity.

Factors co-determining fair elections and successful power sharing

Africa’s political décor

This paper does not focus on the state of African democracy or specific instances of power-sharing problems associated with free and fair elections. Instead it looks into the frequently ignored issue of the ethics and value-oriented norms, if any, underlying such processes.

---

2 As a rule we focus on political power sharing, but power is shared in every area of human life, from marriage and the family to the workplace, the economy and culture. Gender equality, a major issue in our time, was a long struggle that eventually culminated in power sharing, and the struggle continues. Religious revolutions like the 16th century Reformation have to do with truth as power, and because truth cannot be shared, revelational religions that lay claim to truth will not permit power sharing. Religions and ideologies do not negotiate about power. Successful power shifts determine changes in human history at every level. Cultural revolutions are a result of power sharing or takeovers.

3 With reference to Sachs, Maphai (2004:12) writes: “Dealing with minority rights ... what is normally regarded as minority rights are often nothing more than temporary, utilitarian confidence-building mechanisms.”

4 Apart from the fact that people on the ‘underside’ see themselves as powerless and voiceless, even those who are in a position to protest do not really react. Niebuhr (1960:31) writes: “An irrational society accepts injustice because it does not analyse the pretensions made by the powerful and privileged groups of society. Even that portion of society which suffers most from injustice may hold the power, responsible for it, in reverence.”
Hence it examines the philosophical substructure of democratic questions like power, power sharing and justice. By way of putting the paper in context I provide some selected background information.

The move to democratically elected governments has escalated in the 54 African states since the 1990s. Various factors have contributed:

- The success story of South Africa (1994) and the example of Mandela.
- A move away from long-term presidencies and a restriction to three or five year terms (Mandela served only one term and Olesegun Obasejio of Nigeria two terms. Several African countries, however, are still burdened with long-term presidencies: Mugabe in Zimbabwe; Lansana Conte in Guinea, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Colonel Muammar Qadhafi in Libya, and Omar Bongo in Gabon.
- The institution of independent electoral commissions in most African countries (and the use of cell phones in monitoring these). The role of independent observers (e.g. the AU and EU) also makes a difference, as does foreign financial support, without which the successful DRC elections of 2006 would have been impossible.
- Improved intra-African communication (cell phones) and more critical voters, the role of the AU, pan-African parliament and peer group mechanism.
- Regional economic initiatives like the South African Development Community (SADC), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), East African Community (EAC) and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS).

The state of African democracies, successful elections, coups and power-sharing deals is illustrated by the following selective examples:

- According to Freedom House, the US based NGO that measures democracy, there are far more countries in Africa considered completely free today (11) and partially free (34) than there were when its measurements began in 1972 (3 and 10 respectively) or even in 1990 (4 and 18 respectively).
- The number of military coups declined dramatically. In the 1960s Africa saw 24 coups, in the 1990s 14, and in 2000-2008 there were only five. Governments instated by coups meet with fierce opposition and struggle to survive (cf. the Mauritanian coup in August 2008).
- In 2007 Freedom House declared the following counties to be ‘free’: Benin, Botswana, Cape Verde, Ghana, Lesotho, Mali, Mauritius, Namibia, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal and South Africa.
- Countries considered unfree include Guinea, Zimbabwe, Chad, Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia and Swaziland (the latter the last remaining African country with an absolute monarchy).
- ECOWAS has just (October 2009) suspended Niger’s membership because president Mamadou Tandja’s government refuses to postpone the 2010 elections to allow more time for dialogue.
- On the other hand many consider the silent diplomacy of SADC (with its 15 states and 170 million inhabitants) to have been ineffective in Zimbabwe, where schism bedevils the government of national unity, whereas one has to wait until 2010 to see whether this year’s proposed power-sharing deal in Madagascar after the 2009 military coup gets off the ground.

The following general reasons can be advanced for the apparent political volatility in Africa:

The legacy of colonialism and one-party governments, coups d’état and civil war, unfair distribution of power/rights between groups, the state as a guaranteed source of income in light of the relative lack of a strong, job-creating private sector, a culture of patronage; lack of experience/expertise among public servants, absence of an established opposition culture, and ethnically fuelled conflict and nepotism (as the 2007 Kenyan election once again demonstrated).
As regards successful elections, one can cite the following inhibitory factors: use of government resources (funds, media, security services) to privilege the ruling party, lack of an impartial, competent electoral commission, vote rigging, partisan legal tribunals to investigate election fraud/contestations, poor infrastructure and problems regarding remote rural areas, mistrust of elected governments’ ability to improve the lot of individuals and concomitant lack of involvement.

Power sharing, before and/or after elections would appear the best approach currently available to handle conflict at a regional, national and international level. The alternatives range from prolonged civil war or terrorism, to civil disobedience, to inevitable impoverishment and economic depression, to the eventual collapse of the country. But power sharing is not always successful. The common lot of power sharing deals appears to be that they are short-lived. There is too much reliance on rhetorical persuasive powers to sell a solution to political opponents with the aid of foreign and other mediators. Lasting peace is only possible if the diverse people in a country take ownership of a culture of power sharing. Establishing that culture is an ethical matter. Without ownership of the value system underlying a country’s government and the concomitant ethical principles it remains just a strategy to buy time for the warring parties.

But who or what determines the formulas underlying peace and power sharing? After all, the answers are not made up round the negotiation table. At most these are compromises based on existing principles and advantages that some parties already enjoy. It is commonly expected that democratic principles, human rights as spelled out in existing (idealised) constitutions, economic realities, and international considerations will be taken into account – although it rarely happens. Experience has taught us that power sharing negotiations are not that simplistic. Groups in power would hardly accept value systems that limit or take away their power, while minority or disempowered groups readily accept any value system that promises them power. The premise is that there are no trans-national, trans-religious or trans-cultural norms that can be authoritatively invoked to resolve conflict. In practice it is usually pragmatic, utilitarian norms that save the day.

The complexity of each and every instance of power sharing must not be used as an alibi for a fatalistic belief that ‘nothing will ever change’ (the reason for Mbeki’s silent diplomacy approach in Zimbabwe?). The best we can do is to support a system that keeps negotiations as transparent as possible; to screen all direct and indirect role players, their motives and ulterior motives; to urge African leaders to adopt accepted, uniform guidelines and enforce them as far as possible (e.g. those contained in the AU guidelines and the peer review mechanism); to spell out the rights of all parties, both majority and minority ones; to take optimal account of the tyranny of systems (democracy, economic globalisation) and their influence; to speak on behalf of the voiceless who suffer most; and not to countenance the aspect of the human condition that lies at the heart of the problem: self-interest and limitless economic greed.

We now turn to factors that determine successful elections and power sharing in Africa.

Models of governance

Is there an Africa-oriented power sharing that will work for Africa, whereas some other variety will work only for Western and Eastern countries? It could be federalism or consocialism, a liberal or a constitutional democracy, or whatever model. The answer certainly does not lie in any one model. Africa is too diverse for that. Since the 1990s there has been a trend away from one-party states to a form of democracy and power sharing. The process is still in its infancy and is marred by election fraud, intimidation of opposition parties, misuse of a salaried army or freedom fighters, nepotism, patronage by those in power, and the like.

A point to bear in mind is that democracy should not be considered an irrefutable answer to the problem of good governance. Nor must we assume that if democracy is in place and power sharing negotiations are moving on accepted lines, all will be well and prosperity is assured. Below we shall look into criticism of democracy as a suitable model for Africa. Commenting on this style of government Lumumba-Kasongo (2005:2) writes: “It is argued that no contemporary nation-state, individual or social class has a monopoly over democracy and that democracy and its processes are historically and socially learning processes or cognitive human experiences.” He is critical of liberal democracies that do not always keep their promises (Lumumba-Kasongo 2005:6-10), yet he admits: “Africa will not be able to progress collectively and sustain its progress without some kind of democracy” (Lumumba-Kasongo 2005:5). But democratic institutions are not a magic wand. They must be workable and that
requires many assumptions. Lumumba-Kasongo (2005:11) quotes Julius Nyerere: “For democracy means more than voting on the basis of adult suffrage every few years; it means (among other things) an attitude of tolerance, and willingness to operate with others on terms of equality... The nation’s Constitution must provide methods by which the people can, without recourse to violence, control the government, which emerges in accordance with it and even specify the means for its amendment.”

We must remember that the tribal system has prevailed since pre-colonial times up to the present, especially in the countryside. Under that system people are accustomed to care and personal attention. Tribes are relatively small, dispersed and interdependent. Social, economic and ruling functions are in the hands of the chief and the people. That is why, without romanticising them, principles like ujaama and ubuntu worked. In a national democracy people expect the same care and personal attention to which their parents and ancestors were accustomed, but these things are foreign to an impersonal democracy. In mass society ubuntu sentiments have degenerated into an ethics of ‘we vote for you, you look after us’. A culture of critical involvement for the sake of the common good is still in its infancy. The public action of trade unions and their ilk is largely prompted by self-interest: “Even today, most South-Africans, of whatever color, do not consider that they can do much, if anything, about influencing the law, let alone change it. They go to the polls once in five years, cast their vote for a party, and leave the rest to the politicians. If things go wrong, this is blamed on government, but they, the citizens, feel they can do nothing about it until the next election, especially as, under the system of Proportional Representation, they have no immediate contact with or recourse to a member of Parliament to act as a local sounding-board for their complaints or opinion” (Van der Ross, quoted in Kumalo & Dziva 2008:178). Hence in the view of these authors South Africa does not have a living democracy, because the people “wait for delivery of services as promised, and so the government is seen as a delivery mechanism and not as a system of participation in the governance of the country”.

We need an entrenched system of checks and balances when dealing with human power relations. The best way of ensuring ethical power sharing negotiations and multiparty government is an effective culture of human rights. Politicians may be a-moral, but political practice is not. Jackson-Preece (2008:628) says: “The salience of the rights discourse, and politics may be a-moral, but political practice is not. Jackson-Preece (2008:628) says: “The salience of the rights discourse, and politics may be a-moral, but political practice is not. Jackson-Preece (2008:628) says: “The salience of the rights discourse, and...”

Diversity

An ethically cohesive force in a pluralistic democracy like the South African one is the constitution with its bill of rights. The challenge is axiological: to create values that serve the interests of all people. That can be done via a constitution, which is legally enforceable and has the protection of a constitutional court. If the constitution is refined to curb power abuses (corruption, nepotism, party-centrism), it could be one of the best instruments to make power sharing work. Is that the solution to power sharing in Africa? Under a constitution power is shared, the poor are defended, minority groups are given rights, et cetera. It has the advantage that it has symbolic value, provides guidelines and is accessible to all.5

In a sense an ethical link is presupposed by the nature of most African conflicts, be they religious (Sudan; Somaliland), ethnic (Ruanda; Benin),6 racial (Zimbabwe, South Africa) or economic (Nigeria). One could add other causes of conflict such as the absence of a democratic order, nepotism, corruption or dictatorships, all of which presuppose an ethical orientation. African history has proved that religion and its potential contribution to ethical guidelines fan conflict rather than resolve it,7 despite the fact that by and large Africa is one of

5 ‘Liberal democracy’ does not respect absolute majority rule (except when electing representatives). The ‘liberty’ of majority rule is restricted by the constitution. Real power is actually in the hands of a relatively small representative body. Can the Polokwane meeting (towards the end of 2008) be seen as a relative small oligarchy deciding on behalf of all about the road ahead?

6 The influence of African ethnicity on conflict is a controversial issue. A safe answer is that it may play a role along with a host of other factors, to be identified in each local context. With reference to Cameroon, Belinga (2005: 46) sees ethnicity as co-determined by colonial interests: “(E)thnicity draws its ‘credibility’ from a manipulated perception of ethnicity, an offshoot of colonialist anthropology that construed ethnicity as the unmistakable bedrock of determination of social ethos in Africa.” Referring to a study of Benin, he maintains (p 67, n 11) that “the project... show(s) that ethnicity can provide a sound basis for a lasting democracy”.

7 In regard to the two major religions on the continent, Christianity and Islam. Jansen (2004:68) writes with reference to Mamdani: “Islam and Christianity have one thing in common. Both share a deeply messianic orientation. Each has a conviction that it possesses the truth. Both have a sense of mission to civilize the world...
the most religious continents in the world. Differences may not be conveniently elevated to ineluctable fate, which often serves as an alibi for exploitation and oppression.

Is South Africa, a deeply divided society, more divided than other African countries? Deeply divided countries are marked by disparities in race, religion, ethnicity, language (culture) and wealth. South Africa has all these features. Its relative success is attributable to established infrastructure, human capital and investor confidence, its unique constitution and a relatively strong economy. These building blocks must be preserved and developed. Most other African countries lack these advantages. But more important than the advantages are the will and, especially, the goodwill to make a system work. Africa can accommodate its differences and turn cultural and ethnic diversity into a source of strength.

**Economic determinants**

Economic factors are crucial in the establishment of a democracy. Reflection on a governmental model for Africa should not focus only on ethnic groups (important as they are), but should also consider classes and especially major economic inequalities. These can become an instrument for manipulation in elections. Liberal or constitutional democracies build on these inequalities. The problem is that they pretend everyone is equal, but that is not so. We are all equal before the law, but not in the economy. According to the constitution we are all entitled to freedom and respect, but I cannot change overnight so I can exercise that freedom. The absence of a successful economy that can accommodate most citizens makes the civil service (backed by military power) with its fairly guaranteed income a real ideal to strive for. So instead of governing in the sense of ordering society, self-enrichment becomes an end in itself.

If there are only enough job opportunities for 10 to 20 percent of a people’s labour force, problems like power abuse, corruption and nepotism are bound to arise. Even in South Africa, an economic and infrastructural paradise compared to most African countries, these evils feature, because with an unemployment rate of 23 percent in 2008 scarcity remains crucial. That is why, despite non-discriminatory constitutional guidelines, black empowerment and job reservation are practised, which those who are excluded consider discriminatory. The premise seems to be that because economic and other resources are inadequate, fair power sharing principles go by the board. That implies that in most African countries economic development has to proceed by leaps and bounds before one can expect them to enter into equitable power sharing agreements that will ensure freedom and equality. Obviously this is a catch 22 situation, for economic growth is only feasible given stable democratic government and an established human rights culture. One ethically questionable solution is to encourage Eastern countries like China and India that are increasingly interested in investing in Africa without setting criteria for, for instance, observance of human rights. Obviously this is a catch 22 situation, for economic growth is only feasible given stable democratic government and an established human rights culture. One ethically questionable solution is to encourage Eastern countries like China and India that are increasingly interested in investing in Africa without setting criteria for, for instance, observance of human rights. China, at any rate, is not known to have an established human rights culture. But could that not be a solution – to tolerate discrimination and oppression until such time as the economy has improved to the point where the cake is big enough for everyone to have a slice? Or will it

---

8 O’Leary (2008:48) writes: “The division of power, and competition for power, are intelligent principles. But, on their own, they are unlikely to calm deeply divided territories. Indeed, the combination of the division of power and the competition for power may be conducive to the oppression of national, ethnic, and religious communities. The competition for power expresses or creates majorities - and such majorities may be constructed from national, ethnic or communal cleavages. Majorities from the same community may win control over offices and governments - even if the powers of those offices and governments are divided and checked - and then propose discriminatory public policy and conceptions of merit.”

9 Kofi (2005:90-96) mentions, for example, Africa’s enormous capacity to flourish. Although economists may be critical of his optimism, I don’t think his appraisal of Africa’s potential is mistaken.

10 In a context of scarcity and lack of basic amenities, coupled with diversity and a perception that certain groups are privileged above others, freedom fighters are understandable. Arms that are obtained are used to secure rights (economic advantage) for them or some particular group. Much of South Africa’s crime problem is also attributable to this.

11 According to Statistics SA’s latest Labour Force Survey (2009) South Africa’s official unemployment rate fell in the fourth quarter of 2008, mainly due to the construction industry adding jobs and the fact that 97 000 unemployed people gave up looking for positions. On 2 March 2009 the Pretoria-based agency said that the unemployment rate fell from 23.2 percent in the third quarter of 2008 to 21.9 percent of the labour force in the fourth quarter. At the end of last year the number of unemployed people totalled 3.873 million. The total number of employed people increased by 189 000 to 13.844 million. However, the total labour force was down by 59 000 to 17.718 million.

be a case of the larger the cake, the bigger the slice of corrupt individuals among those who cut up the cake? For the poor all it ever means is the proverbial crumbs from the table...

The point is that voting for a government in a situation where most people enjoy relative prosperity and rights, are informed and have the will to change things is very different from voting for a government that simply does not have the means to provide jobs, education, medical care, security and an income. In such a situation of critical scarcity power groups, discrimination, corruption and oppression are well-nigh inevitable.

Thus the link between ethics and fair governance shifts entirely to an economic and developmental level. It shifts to the arena of big money lenders and donor countries, where ethical principles, if any, are determined unilaterally. The absence of democratic rule in many African countries can be explained on similar lines. Western countries that take the moral high ground and decry African practices do very little about the roots of the problem. It is not just a matter of corrupt individuals but of the absence of basic material conditions for democracy.

Can scarcity and underdevelopment be seen as the sole cause of all discrimination? 

What about African values and African spirituality? Are the values cherished by a society and the sacrifices people are prepared to make not worth far more than economic 'growth' based on the exclusion of minorities and disempowered groups? The ANC was not liberated from apartheid but by apartheid. It is *because* they experienced apartheid that they can declare with one voice that the sun will never again rise on such unfreedom and injustice, yet we know it still rises on grave injustices every morning... Racism and discrimination, however justified it might appear to be (e.g. affirmative or any other racially based action), cannot be smuggled in by the backdoor. That makes a farce of the liberation struggle. Thus ethical guidelines are a must in power sharing agreements - despite scarcity!

Whilst the importance of economic factors is acknowledged, economic models remain unimpeachable, just like governments' self-interest. What underlies power sharing is not ethical guidelines but the 'value system' of self-interest. In this respect Niebuhr (1960:84) many years ago recalled Washington's words: "No state ... has ever entered a treaty for any other reason than self-interest ... A statesman who has any other motive would deserve to be hung." Niebuhr contemplates the puzzle of the self-obsession and selfishness of nations. He draws his examples almost exclusively from the Christian West. What applies to negotiation between countries applies equally to contending interest groups within a country.

When it comes to Africa it is no secret that the West's economic interests and its hold on the continent play a major role in negotiations. If divisions are economically profitable, they are supported, and vice versa. There are also deeply rooted sentiments that can sway negotiations one way or another. 

Whilst in no way suggesting that Zimbabwe's president Mugabe obstinate stance is wise or commendable, his pertinicity in sticking to his programme in the face of Western condemnation is noteworthy. The underlying sentiment to free Africa from all 'outside interference' is probably the reason for the support he receives. 

Whether the sentiment is sustainable considering the consequences, is another matter. Even if his protest was justified, the method he adopts is catastrophic for his country and his people. Besides, he did not get on that high horse until he lost the referendum and his monopoly on self-enrichment was in jeopardy. If SADC leaders were to speak out openly in favour of the protest was justified, the method he adopts is catastrophic for his country and his people. It is not just a matter of corrupt individuals but of the absence of basic material conditions for democracy.

Can scarcity and underdevelopment be seen as the sole cause of all discrimination?

What about African values and African spirituality? Are the values cherished by a society and the sacrifices people are prepared to make not worth far more than economic 'growth' based on the exclusion of minorities and disempowered groups? The ANC was not liberated from apartheid but by apartheid. It is *because* they experienced apartheid that they can declare with one voice that the sun will never again rise on such unfreedom and injustice, yet we know it still rises on grave injustices every morning... Racism and discrimination, however justified it might appear to be (e.g. affirmative or any other racially based action), cannot be smuggled in by the backdoor. That makes a farce of the liberation struggle. Thus ethical guidelines are a must in power sharing agreements - despite scarcity!

Whilst the importance of economic factors is acknowledged, economic models remain unimpeachable, just like governments' self-interest. What underlies power sharing is not ethical guidelines but the 'value system' of self-interest. In this respect Niebuhr (1960:84) many years ago recalled Washington's words: "No state ... has ever entered a treaty for any other reason than self-interest ... A statesman who has any other motive would deserve to be hung." Niebuhr contemplates the puzzle of the self-obsession and selfishness of nations. He draws his examples almost exclusively from the Christian West. What applies to negotiation between countries applies equally to contending interest groups within a country.

When it comes to Africa it is no secret that the West's economic interests and its hold on the continent play a major role in negotiations. If divisions are economically profitable, they are supported, and vice versa. There are also deeply rooted sentiments that can sway negotiations one way or another. 

Whilst in no way suggesting that Zimbabwe's president Mugabe obstinate stance is wise or commendable, his pertinicity in sticking to his programme in the face of Western condemnation is noteworthy. The underlying sentiment to free Africa from all 'outside interference' is probably the reason for the support he receives.

Whether the sentiment is sustainable considering the consequences, is another matter. Even if his protest was justified, the method he adopts is catastrophic for his country and his people. Besides, he did not get on that high horse until he lost the referendum and his monopoly on self-enrichment was in jeopardy. If SADC leaders were to speak out openly in favour of the protest was justified, the method he adopts is catastrophic for his country and his people. It is not just a matter of corrupt individuals but of the absence of basic material conditions for democracy.

A Marshall plan for Africa?

Without harking back to the history of Idealism one could say that some events may be considered historically seminal in that they determine the course of history (corresponding to the notion of an axial period). There are also individual acts that are turning points in history (Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon; the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the

Kofi (2005:236-7) comments on Mugabe: “Firstly, he seems obsessed with British prime minister Tony Blair, making of him an ever-lurking, omnipotent phantom. The way Mugabe rants when talking about whites reveals deep trauma suffered under the racist regime of Ian Smith...”

Kofi (2005:227) cites Mugabe (*The Zimbabwean*, 1 April 2005): ‘Zimbabwe is for black people, not white people. Our party must continue to strike fear in the heart of the white man, our real enemy.’ That after singing the whites' praises in the late 1980s (Kofi 2005:227). Kofi (2005:231-237) points out the irrationality of the land grabs and Mugabe's discrimination against his own people, citing Soyinka who calls Mugabe “a disgrace to the continent”.

Mugabe was given a hero’s welcome on his arrival at president Zuma’s inauguration ceremony. Kofi (2005:228) cites a survey of readers of the London based *New African* in Augustus 2004 in which they had to name ‘the greatest 100 Africans of all time’. Mugabe came third, after Mandela and Nkruma!
Austro-Hungarian throne in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, which triggered World War I); De Klerk’s Rubicon speech\textsuperscript{15} in February 1990; 9/11, etc). The aim of citing these facts is to counteract the perception that Africa has no evolutionary history, that futile conflict is the hallmark of the continent, that Africa never acts but only reacts.\textsuperscript{16}

The establishment of a democratic order in South Africa in 1994 may come to be seen as such a turning point in African history. The changes it has already wrought in a scant fifteen years support this belief (see Kofi 2005: 97ff;100), as do the growth of intra-African trade, peace-keeping forces in African countries, contributions to the African parliament and the AU, initiatives like Nepad and the promotion of the African Renaissance, and the burgeoning idea of a United States of Africa.\textsuperscript{17} Hence we are looking for an event or a process (for which the continent is ready and of which many will take ownership) that will in fact bring about an African Renaissance. Kofi (2005:86) visualises it as an economic plan: “Africa needs a 'Marshall Plan', a Mandela Plan, or a Nkrumah Plan.” To him this entails more than just injections of foreign money, but requires initiatives in Africa’s internal structuring.

Hegel linked the development of Spirit with the historically laborious establishment of the notion of freedom. He saw the zenith of this process in the German monarchy. “The East knew and to the present day knows only that One is Free; the Greek and Roman world, that some are free; the German World knows that All are free. The first political form therefore which we observe in History, is Despotism, the second Democracy and Aristocracy, the third Monarchy” (Hegel 1956:104). Africa’s struggle was and remains a freedom struggle. That freedom is impossible without economic freedom. Ethics and an ethic of freedom – basic to all negotiations – depend on the achievement of conducive external conditions. That co-determines what we mean by fair government.

**Power and justice: altruistic ideals and the human condition**

**Use and misuse of power**

As our world becomes more complex, so the structures in which power is entrenched become more intricate. That is evidenced by the plethora of laws and rules that regulate human behaviour in sophisticated, industrialised countries, for instance the absurd number of legal claims by people who feel that their personal rights have been infringed in some way. Ironically, the very freedom of the individual breeds such a host of regulations that freedom becomes a dead letter.

Being human means having power and being subjected to power: “[P]ower balances are an aspect of all human relationships” (Elias 2005:222). But what are the limits to power?\textsuperscript{18} As societies become more complex, clear-cut norms fragment into multiple beliefs and uniform ethical standards into a diversity of ethical views that are taken to be the best option for now. Our world is changing too rapidly to put our trust in just one set of guidelines. Post-Foucault, we mistrust society’s perception of normality, because behavioural codes are laid down by institutions of power. \textsuperscript{19} Maybe what this adds up to is that human beings cannot be trusted and that their lives need to be monitored Orwellian style. That does not apply only to the lower professional echelons but all the more to those in managerial positions who handle

\textsuperscript{15} The so-called Rubicon speech by former president Botha, prior to this event, did not warrant the name.

\textsuperscript{16} This perception is probably stronger than we think. Does it originate from Hegel? In his *The philosophy of history* (1956:99) he says: "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it - that is in its northern part - belong to the Asiatic or European World."

\textsuperscript{17} Although at present it looks as if Nepad has been nipped in the bud and the African Renaissance has yet to enter the world arena, it is early days. The ideas have been established and the signs are there: the idea of a united Africa, a single currency, intra-African trade, exploitation of the continent’s vast economic potential, et cetera (see Kofi 2005:70,73, 87, 90-96).

\textsuperscript{18} Hume (1968:150ff ) lists various forms of human power: natural (our natural abilities); instrumental (wealth, friends); success; nobility; eloquence; and so on. But the principal form of power is that of government: “The Greatest of humane Powers, is that which is compounded of the Powers of most men, united by consent, in one person, Natural, or Civil, that has the use of all their Powers depending on his will; such as is the Power of a Common-wealth...” (Hume 1968:150).

\textsuperscript{19} Hume (1978:475) was critical of a causal connection between virtue and what is considered natural: “…nothing can be more unphilosophical than those systems, which assert, that virtue is the same with what is natural, and vice with what is unnatural …’Tis impossible therefore, that the character of natural and unnatural can ever, in any sense, mark the boundaries of vice and virtue. Thus we are still brought back to our first position, that virtue is distinguished by pleasure, and vice by the pain, that any action, sentiment or character gives us by the mere view and contemplation.”
huge amounts of money, evidenced by the Enron affair in America and in similar scandals in recent times. For that reason individuals need to be constantly vigilant against swindles in the workplace, in commerce and advertising, investment schemes, new legislation, or at a personal level by friends or relatives. The modernist notion that we are evolving morally into a society of civilised people of integrity appears to be illusory. As soon as societal stress levels rise even slightly – and they are already excessive – violence erupts. Ethical distribution of power presupposes a society of equals. If there are flagrant racial, religious, cultural and ethnic differences, the chances of power abuse are even higher, because people are more inclined to abuse power towards outsiders belonging to some or other interest group. The pursuit of a balance of power is not confined to the political arena where our rights are determined at macro level: it affects every facet of our lives.

Some see this as inherent in human nature, which is marked by a struggle of all against all and survival of the fittest. Others feel that view is too deterministic, arguing that we are not victims of our nature but are capable of achieving altruistic goals counter to nature: “Now coming back to the question with which we started, the nature of normality, we have come close to identifying it with the highest excellence of which we are capable. But this ideal in not an unattainable goal set out far ahead of us; rather it is actually within us, existent but hidden, as potentiality rather than as actuality” (Porter 1988:183). Such an approach, however, is incongruous in situations of extreme stress, in which ‘normality’ is in fact a war of everybody against everybody. In nature the law of survival applies marginally less in an ecologically balanced environment.

Ultimately, it seems our biological ontology takes precedence over any moral ontology. In times of need and want only very exceptional people transcend self-interest and self-preservation. Nonetheless our biological orientation is governed by socio-cultural forces. Cynically we might observe that the concept of people as political animals simply means animal politics. Thus it seems meaningful to try and interpret human behaviour and value systems in terms of evolutionary, more specifically biological ethics. That is evident in the saying that people will not be guided by justice and fairness if their desires dictate otherwise and they are able to satisfy their desires without adverse consequences. Johnson (1993:234) puts it thus: “Contrary to extreme relativistic charges, moralities are not radically incommensurable forms of life. The fact of our embodiment guarantees this much. We all have bodies that have at least a core set of universal needs and desires. Beyond that small core there may be broad variations across cultures. Still, we all need love, shelter, food, and protection from harm. We all feel pain, joy fear, and anger. There are certain basic-level experiences we all have ... That is why there are prototypes of the bully, breach of promise, the Good Samaritan, and exclusion from the group as basic human experiences...”

Much has been written about people’s biologically driven egotism and the Christian virtue of altruism. In practice this usually amounts to the weaker party having to display the altruism. Niebuhr (1956:76) points out the limitations of Christian morality to have any social benefits worth mentioning: “Slavery, injustice, inequality of wealth, war, these all were accepted as ordained by the ‘natural law’ which God had devised for man’s sinful state”. He attributes the defeatism of religion to “a too consistent God-world, spirit-body dualism, in which the fact that natural impulses in history economic and political life move under less restraint of reason and conscience than in the private conduct of individuals” (Niebuhr 1956:78). This is in keeping with the general trend described in his book, namely that whereas morality is still feasible at an individual level, it soon evaporates at the level of larger groups, classes or nationalities.

But even at an individual level personal advantage takes priority of the advantage of others, especially when there is no particular bond with the other. To abuse power if you think you can get away with it appears to be an irresistible temptation. The problem is mostly that the party that wins the election and forms a government appropriates surplus power. That means greater power than ordinary people possess. Surplus power entails exceeding one’s given capacity and, on the basis of one’s status, demanding more than one is entitled to. By

---

20 The Enron affair was a financial scandal involving Enron Corporation (trading in gas and electricity) and its accounting firm Arthur Andersen, which was exposed in late 2001. After a series of revelations involving irregular accounting procedures conducted throughout the 1990s, Enron was on the verge of bankruptcy by November 2001. Enron filed for bankruptcy on 2 December 2001. As the scandal emerged, Enron shares dropped from over US$90.00 to less than 50¢. Enron’s plunge occurred after revelations that much of its profits and revenue was the result of deals with special purpose entities (limited partnerships which it controlled). The result was that many of Enron’s debts and the losses that it suffered were not reported in its financial statements. In addition, the scandal caused the dissolution of Arthur Andersen, which at the time was one of the five largest accounting firms in the world.
virtue of winning in an election members of that party or group are privileged. In the name of public safety innocent people, or ones who pose no real danger to the state, are detained. In the name of free market systems people are exploited beyond reasonable profit margins. On grounds of so-called accepted political policy they are deprived of their right to comment critically on decisions. On grounds of protracted negotiations they are subjected to years of exploitation and wretchedness, as happened in Zimbabwe. Citizens’ credulity, civil obedience, loyalty and defencelessness are all exploited. Corruption is simply the belief that corrupt, self-interested actions will remain hidden and we will get away with it.

One way or another, human rule over their fellow humans – be it a monarchy, an aristocracy or democracy – is always flawed. Hannah Arendt (2005:237), referring to Hobbes and the sovereign European nation-state, writes: “Today we ought to add the latest and perhaps most formidable form of such dominion: bureaucracy or the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called rule by Nobody. (If, in accord with traditional political thought, we identify tyranny as government that is not held to give account of itself, rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is being done. It is this state of affairs, making it impossible to localize responsibility and to identify the enemy, that is among the most potent causes of the current world-wide rebellious unrest, its chaotic nature, and its dangerous tendency to get out of control and to run amuck.)"

The great value of Hannah Arendt’s work was that she showed that the state is not entitled to its power and that it only has that power because it received it from the people (Arendt 1958: 200-203). She had lived through a period when the German people were whipped up by an ideology, and although most people let themselves be carried away, many who realised the dangers involved simply looked on helplessly. She distinguishes between power and strength. Whereas strength is something you possess, like muscular strength, power is something you are given, which is vested in you and which you can just as quickly lose. “Power is always, as we would say, a power potential and not an unchangeable, measurable, and reliable entity like force or strength ... Only where men live so close together that the potentialities of action are always present can power remain with them ... For power, like action is boundless: it has no physical limitation in human nature, in the bodily existence of man, like strength. Its only limitation is the existence of other people, but this limitation is not accidental, because human power corresponds to the condition of plurality to begin with. For the same reason, power can be divided without decreasing it, and the interplay of powers with its checks and balances is even liable to generate more power, so long, at least as the interplay is alive and has not resulted in stalemate” (Arendt 1958: 200-201). Thus those in power often lose power (that is popular support) and stay in power because all that remains is brute military force. “From this results the by no means infrequent political combination of force and powerlessness, an array of impotent forces that spend themselves, often spectacularly and vehemently but in utter futility, leaving behind neither monuments nor stories, hardly enough memory to enter into history at all” (Arendt 1958:202).

To Arendt a plurality of figures in the public arena of the marketplace is the only way of actualising freedom and responsibility. As a rule that is what monarchs suppress, because a plurality impedes the notion of just one sovereign. Arendt (1958:220-221) writes: “The most obvious salvation from the dangers of plurality is monarchy, or one-man-rule, in its many varieties, from outright tyranny of one against all to benevolent despotism and to those forms of democracy in which the many form a collective body so that people ‘is [are] many in one’ and constitute themselves as a ‘monarch’.” Even Plato’s ideal of the philosopher king falls in this category: “But they all have in common the banishment of the citizens from the public realm and the insistence that they mind their private business while only ‘the ruler should attend to public affairs’” (Arendt 1958:221). Arendt wants to restore the say of thoughtful, involved citizens. Most people, usually in situations of oppression, believe that when they lose political power, they lose all power. That is a reduction. The citizen’s most basic right is the franchise and it does not leave her voiceless. But the ruler or monarch is not solely to blame. He would have no power if he had not received it. Government remains an inescapable

21 An example is the emphasis on secrecy in many negotiations. Negotiators must be trusted to do the best thing in their communication. Details and norms that were observed cannot be disclosed because of the sensitive nature of the negotiations. That implies that criticism by an uninformed public is not permitted.
necessity because human, biologically structured desire puts people in a state of constant warfare over which they have no control. The only way to channel that energy appears to be to incorporate desire positively in the economic warfare. But underlying the system we still have human desire in the form of greed and power through self-enrichment.

Analogous to Arendt’s notion that people’s rule over other people is simply perpetuated in new, equally unsatisfactory ways, Foucault examines domination and the exercise of power via biological power. In what we have said so far the accent was basically on thinkers who look to human nature to account for the phenomenon of power and mode of government. This line of thinking can be extended to Foucault’s work, which stresses the role of government in exercising power over its subjects. Governments, social contracts and all that have to do with human vulnerability and the human quest for security. We vacillate between nature and culture, between our biology and our sociology. To governments human biological vulnerability to the constant threat of death is advantageous. The fact of death underlies societal strategies: “The old power of death that symbolized sovereign power was now carefully supplanted by the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life” (Foucault 2005:81). Fear of death and the instincts of self-defence and self-preservation are among the most powerful drives of all living creatures. Hobbes (1978:188) sees ‘use’ of the fear of death as instrumental for government strategy: “The Passions that incline men to Peace, are Feare [sic] of Death”, and only the sovereign, with whom individuals form a social contract, can protect them against untimely death. Only the sovereign who holds human lives in his hands can exercise authority and prevent them from making constant war on each other. Hence power and fear are interdependent. Without fear those in power cannot rule. Fear of those in power (tyrants) keeps them in power.

Power and desire: between scarcity and abundance

Towards the end of Plato’s symposium Socrates narrates his experience with Diotima to explain who Eros (love) was. In teaching him about love she showed that Eros cannot be divine because he “has no portion in what is either good or fair”. He is in fact a great spirit (daimon), a medium for God’s interchange with humans. He was begotten by Poros, the god of plenty, who was seduced by Penia (poverty) when he was drunk after a feast of the gods in honour of Aphrodite’s birthday. Hence Eros is Aphrodite’s follower and attendant. And because of his parentage, “he is always poor, and anything but tender and fair, as the many imagine him; and he is rough and squalid, and has no shoes, nor a house to dwell in.” He takes after his father: always plotting against the fair and the good; bold, enterprising, strong, keen in the pursuit of wisdom, fertile in resources; a philosopher at all times, an enchanter, sorcerer, sophist. He is alternately alive and flourishing when he has plenty, and dead at another moment. So he is never in want and never in wealth, always in a state between ignorance and knowledge. Gods do not seek wisdom, for they are wise already. Neither do the ignorant, being self-satisfied in their ignorance. The only ones who desire wisdom are "those who are in a mean between the two; Eros is one of them ... for his father is wealthy and wise, and his mother poor and foolish."

The story symbolises the human condition. Eros is the symbol of desire which is always vacillating between fulfilment and unfulfilment. That reflects the human condition: humans not only vacillate between scarcity and abundance, but are dissatisfied even in times of plenty and, like Eros, are continually seeking fulfilment - as the history of desire in human life shows. It is the driving force in human initiative and determines, inter alia, the economy. As in Eros’s case, desire is mainly that of the individual, and each person has to find her own strategies to find fulfilment. Does that mean we are biologically determined and driven to constantly seek fulfilment, new resources to perpetuate the process? That would mean that we are destined to exhaust our planet’s limited resources prematurely. What applies at an individual level also applies to society, to corporates and governments, all of which translate life into the fulfilment of insatiable desire.

The harsh biological reality is that we have managed to create a culture of scarcity in an environment of plenty, which has to serve as a driving force for development and economies. Scarcity provides the basis of the struggle. The human problem, unlike that of species in a given ecological environment, is that we manufacture scarcity. It is often induced artificially through market manipulation, advantaging some individuals, ethnic groups, races, trades and professions, cooperation in the form of conspiracies that benefit the few. The strategy of surplus power applies particularly to the economy in the form of surplus capital, when services...
and goods are sold at far more than they are worth to optimise profit. Surplus power and surplus scarcity coexist.

A successful market economy presupposes democracy. Democratically elected governments serve the market, for that is what ensures jobs and affluence for their constituency. The market has a missionary bent. It continually needs new proselytes: a stagnant market is doomed to failure. Poor, economically struggling countries have to observe the values of democracy and economic globalisation or stay poor. One reason for Africa’s suffering and poverty is that it does not meet the condition for a sound market economy, namely democracy; affluence means democracy. One can add a rider: democracy presupposes competence – including simulation of market mechanisms.

The desire for high self-esteem leads to comparison with others who have more than me, hence the sense of scarcity inherent in mimetic competition. The rich never have enough and the poor appear unable to break free from the poverty cycle. Galbraith refers to a ‘built-in’ kind of economic principle that tells people when they have enough. We appear to have lost that: “What is called economic development consists in no small part in devising strategies to overcome the tendency of men to place limits on their objectives as regards income and thus on their efforts” (Galbraith quoted in Baudrillard 1998:73; also see Niebuhr 1956:44, Girard 1987).

Whereas scarcity is always manufactured to stimulate desire (for I don’t desire what is readily available, only what is scarce and unique), we are now confronted with scarcity that threatens to assume global proportions – not only scarcity of natural resources, but also of water and a people-friendly climate. Capitalism – until recently the norm for economic models – shares the illusion that endless natural resources will always be there for never-ending exploitation.

**Conclusion**

Increased development means greater complexity. In Africa greater complexity relates to increased empowerment of individuals and interest groups: their exposure to norms of justice and good governance, better communication (cell phones and the internet), awareness of rights, and appeals to the media and mediating agencies. While the ideal of constitutional democracy is based on values that a government is supposed to strive for and implement, it cannot rely on a constitution to enable it to rule justly. Besides, there are no unimpeachable, transcendent norms to serve as a blueprint, because every age has to allow for its own contingent historical circumstances.

Despite cynicism about the role of ethics in fair elections and power sharing deals, the ideal has to be pursued. We are not at the mercy of biology and natural drives. The human condition of egotism and desire makes systems of checks and balances all the more important. Among the checks and balances are the constitution, the promotion of a human rights culture, the media, and pressure by civil society. The impact of historical axial figures and events must not be underestimated. Africa has numerous examples of historical figures who effectively protested against injustice. Direct and indirect public involvement in fair government must be maximised.

All is not gloom and doom on the African continent. We need more of the realistic optimism of a writer like Kofi to put us on the road to victory. Hope of a successful African Renaissance starts with the empowerment of every individual. Our point of departure is that Africa is irreversibly committed to follow this route. Involvement by those that have already been liberated and those still struggling for freedom must be elevated to an ethical imperative.

Civilization is not a gift, it is an achievement – a fragile achievement that needs constantly to be shored up and defended from besiegers inside and out (Taylor 1994:72).

**Works consulted**


