

The ideology in African parties

Political parties, in the modern sense, appeared at the beginning of the 20th century.

The Industrial Revolution and the advent of capitalism favored the appearance of new political parties, as well as new political elements, such as universal suffrage and the expansion of democracy, spawning a new model for modern political parties in which ideology would be a vital factor for their political development.

Universal suffrage facilitated the appearance of the Socialist party, with a class sharing a clear and stable ideology. It was a bureaucratic, centralized and organized party with a governmental program based on ideological principles.

Following World War II, as Europe undertook a process of reconstruction, a cycle of capitalism began based on the notion of the welfare state. These elements created a middle class with significant spending power, as workers' children, who belonged to the ideologized parties of the masses, had access to universities, thereby reordering society. At the political level the electorate expanded.

There also appeared the non-ideological party, which served a diversity of interests.

There was a change through the mass media, rather than through "cells."

Ideology is necessary in a political party, though it is not a necessary condition to define one. No human association can exist without an ideology. Ideally, ideological aims are stable. Otherwise, parties without defined and stable ideologies can be injurious to representative democracy, and be considered deceptive by their voters if they endorse a given political platform, based on a certain ideology, which leaders decide to change once in power.

- Ideology is linked, in one way or another, to political parties.

- Parties with an unstable ideology can push democracy towards a dangerous political instability.

Political parties are led by people who need an ideology to guide certain actions. Nowadays, however, parties founded on homogenous ideologies lose sectors of the electorate and are doomed to electoral failure.

In contrast, parties that advance governmental programs accommodating ampler ideologies are those that obtain the greatest numbers of representatives.

Without a defined ideology serious conceptual confusion is created, as principles are not explained. Parties can regularly change their simple ideologies, generating enormous confusion in the electorate.

Political parties present their agendas and programs based on ideological principles, such that party organizations should have stable ideologies.

Parties' ideologies, and their implantation in society, are cornerstones of democracy.

2) Now we are going to examine parties and ideology on our African continent.

This subject is somewhat complicated, but I will try to present a relatively short and simple explanation that is as clear as possible.

To begin, I believe it is worthwhile to take a look back at recent history, at the origin of the different African parties' and countries' political ideologies.

In my view the European countries' (which had previously dominated Africa) great error during the years of African independence, commencing in the 1960s, was that they handed over the territories

to certain groups, movements or leaders, without having prepared the citizens to take their first steps towards democratic development. In this regard the Cold War and its spheres of influence also, perhaps, had an impact.

It is difficult to understand how countries like the United Kingdom and France, whose political bases had already been democratic for years, had not prepared them, through democratic foundations and principles, before granting them independence.

The case of Portugal was different because it was under a dictatorship, which soon gave way to a system dominated by Communists, who gave independence and power in the colonies to Communist groups and movements.

During that era the world, including Africa, was divided into two great blocks, a situation that largely disintegrated with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Communism at the end of the 80s and early 90s.

We cannot change history, but we can correct some of the errors committed during eras very different from the one we are all living in today.

If we speak about the countries represented here today, we find that most of them were given over to Communist movements that for many years were constituted as sole parties that perceived in any desire for democracy on the part of citizens or groups a danger that must be destroyed, as it threatened their privileges, more than their ideology.

Different countries went through different stages, some violent, like Mozambique and Angola, while others advanced in a peaceful way, like Zambia among others.

The change that came about in South Africa is a historical reality in which both the political leaders and society were and are the true protagonists, although they parted from very different bases.

There is no doubt that each country's past and how and when they obtained their independence have shaped their futures and their first parties' political futures.

Many have spent long periods under dominant single parties, based on the Communist system, which sought to control everything and everyone, with centrally-planned economies that did not foster opportunities to create wealth, but rather just the opposite.

Fortunately, little by little politics have opened up to other parties with different ideas and principles that address citizens' concerns and demands, forcing sole parties to change their policies and adapt to the democratic system - generally with reluctance, as for them this has spelled a loss of power. It is clear that these changes, whether voluntary or forced, have great political merit, as the alternative would be chaos, as we are seeing in some African countries today.

The situation of apartheid in South Africa, unacceptable from every point of view, political and human, was taken advantage of by all the parties and countries headed by totalitarian regimes in the region to unite through what was called the Front Line, mutually protecting each other and their policies. Today, though debilitated and changed, it continues to survive.

It is difficult to generalize with regards to these subjects, and sometimes unjust, but I will try to provide a broad perspective on political ideology in the region.

With regards to regional political changes there are several points that we must highlight, which have contributed to a shift towards democracy. Although still deficient in most cases, they mark, without a doubt, the start of what we hope will be a future based on participative and transparent democracy.

Contributions and collaboration by the western countries, economic improvements and the

availability of natural resources, social movements, the mass media, new technologies like the Internet, education, and globalization, among other factors, are the main motors driving this political change, which must continue until it secures these countries' democratic development, for the benefit of all their citizens, not their political elites.

My personal opinion, after 24 years in Africa, is that we cannot expect, overnight, the overnight establishment of democratic regimes like those which western countries enjoy. Even they, with long-standing democracies, have their problems.

It is necessary to understand the circumstances of each country, and we have to give them the time necessary for traditional customs to adapt to the democratic system; time for citizens to understand democracy, with its rights and obligations; time for institutions to cease from being partisan, accepting and taking the steps necessary so that democracy is a reality for their countries; and time for parties to make a true effort towards acceptance and adaptation, avoiding violence and confrontation.

By this I do not mean to make an excuse for countries not progressing towards fuller democracies, or taking the steps necessary to implement them, but we cannot accept a democracy, as they say in some countries, "for the Englishman to see."

Political parties, through their ideologies, must be the driving force behind democratic development and social welfare, for the benefit of all citizens, and not just a few.

Democracy is an effort encompassing everyone, in which all must participate, and it does not come free.

We must all work to obtain and to maintain it if we want to have social justice, freedom and prosperity.

Democracy is the basis for political parties, accommodating their ideological differences and their coexistence within a diversity of ideas and actions.

In Africa there are countries with more than 50 political parties, the vast majority of them lacking political or electoral sway or significance.

Often they become a way of life, a profession for some people, who use politics as simply a means for economic survival. For them politics is a career devoid of a sense of dedication or sacrifice for the common good or their respective countries' development.

These parties lack true ideologies, seizing upon whatever allows them to survive, without any real political action work. In general they take advantage of the funds provided by governments for the different elections, or from other organizations, while projecting an image that does not correspond to reality.

If we focus on the parties in power, and parties that can be viable alternatives for government, as well as parties with a national presence in their respective countries, and which are relevant, the number drops to three or four per country.

These are the parties that can turn the different situations around in their countries, and upon which we should focus, examining their different ideologies.

In a good number of the countries represented here, after many years the same parties have remained in power, ever since their independence. For example, in Angola, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe, featuring leftist ideologies, where opposition parties' electoral and ideological alternatives have been repeatedly quashed, and repeated elections have not been transparent enough. This obstruction of opposition could ultimately generate destabilizing conflicts.

Some parties that started out with leftist or Socialist platforms over time have shifted towards centrist or center-right ideologies, or even evolved towards undefined ones, allowing them to

present different lines of rhetoric and remain electorally and politically competitive – perhaps due, in part, to fierce competition with other parties sharing similar ideologies.

Within the parties there have also been struggles for leadership, which have led to divisions between their members and the creation of new parties with new ideologies, whether similar or completely different, for the purpose of finding a niche on the political spectrum, at times with a logical base, at times for personal interests.

We see a clear example of this situation in South Africa. Although the ANC is more of a movement than a party, and one that welcomed and brought together a whole range of different parties and ideologies, it is difficult to fathom how such a diversity of ideas and principles can coexist in the same party without tensions.

We have had Communists, Socialists, union organizations, and even the New National Party, heir to the party in power, under apartheid, among others.

In my opinion this incomprehensible situation was due to the fact that all these organizations wanted to take advantage of the political change and enjoy their share of power under the new political structure, without assigning importance to ideology.

As is logical, this situation could not last forever, and for some time there has been internal dissension, giving rise to the creation of new parties formed by former leaders or important figures in the ANC with different ideologies, or for personal ambitions.

African parties' ideologies, with some exceptions, are malleable.

If we focus on parties with Socialist/Communist ideologies that won independence, and once fervently defended that ideology, many today, for a range of reasons, do not wish to espouse their formerly leftist ideologies. They have become, we might say, capitalists, or at least apply liberal policies incompatible with their previous ideologies and founding statutes.

It is also true that certain periods are different, and that all of them tend to try to favor the development of their economies and improvements for their citizens. Personal experience has demonstrated to them that the centrally-directed economies which they had originally implemented could not foster the development their people sought. The change has been very positive, and, although there is still a long road ahead, they have taken a major important step forward to benefit their respective countries.

In spite of changes and situations that have, at times, been illogical from an ideological and political perspective, in general southern Africa has been able to maintain peace and development, unlike northern Africa, where every day there emerge new political and military problems, destabilizing the region. Here there is a lack of ideology and there appear other components, such as religion and personal interests, which only aggravate the situation.

The ideology of the main parties in Africa today is centered on Socialism, along with centrist and center-right policies. These are the main political trends, which, in principle, correspond to the principal ideologies in Europe. The Socialist International (SI) party and Christian Democrat International (CDI) are the political organizations with the most African member parties.

It is important to maintain these political lines and to avoid populism and extremism, from both the Left and Right, which could dash all the progress made to date, and trigger political and economic chaos once again.

It is also important to reduce the excessive number of parties in the different countries, which only creates confusion and debilitate, in elections, those that are really capable of forming governments, and relevant opposition parties that can monitor and check governments' actions.

Time and experience, as well as generational change in the different parties, will be the forces for change today and tomorrow, moderating their ideologies and their political actions for the benefit of citizens.

With all its defects, we must recognize that southern Africa has been an example of democratic progress in recent years, which has contributed to its economic growth, as the political changes show, although we still have a long way to go.