



# **In Criticism of the Western Mind and Practices: Towards a New Vision for African Development\***

Ibrahim Nasr el-Din\*\*

## **Introduction**

According to the jargons of a new language, outright aggression on foreign nations is now termed preventive or preemptive strike or even self-defense. The occupation of foreign territories is named liberation and national resistance to occupation is considered terrorism that needs to be contained at any cost. Freedom fighters are murdered without investigation and illegitimate force is employed to set a precedent to be used in the future by the hegemonic nation. The destruction of the alleged weapons of mass destruction in Iraq has been carried out using the most lethal of weapons. Millions of besieged children have been killed and subjected to hunger, famine and disease in the name of human rights and in search of a more democratic world order.

This is the bleak picture of today's world in the aftermath of the cold war and under the banner of globalization, which aims at subjugating the global south to a nation embarking upon an imperial project at any cost, in the shortest possible time frame and at the lowest price, the victim being ordered to pay the price of its occupation, the repression of its people and the plundering of its riches.

Is this new reality a reflection of a new western thought that has emerged in the aftermath of the cold war, or has it been part and parcel of the fabric of the western mind since the dawn of history?

## **First: In Criticism of the Western Mind**

A closer look at the western cultural heritage reflected in its political thought, norms, customs and practices, reveals the duality of the western mind, which is both exclusionary and hegemonic.

Historically speaking, Greek thought has classified humans into the free, who enjoy all their rights, and the slaves who are deprived of each and

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\*\* President, African association of political Science (2001-2003), and Professor of Political Science, Cairo University, Egypt.

every right. Their very right to life is a function of the will of the free. The legalistic Roman thinking did not deviate much from this line of thought, distinguishing clearly between the Roman citizen who enjoys all his rights and the subjects of foreign origins who are not allowed any of those rights. European medieval political thought followed suit after the spread of Christianity, whereby western believers were distinguished from the heathens, who inhabited the colonies and whose evil souls needed salvation either by death or conversion to Christianity. Modern western colonialism reinforced this segregation, distinguishing the western civilized from the colonized barbarians. The international mandate system imposed on the colonized peoples in the aftermath of the first world war considered the colonized peoples as a *sacred trust*, a burden carried dutifully by the western civilization, who had the mission of civilizing those peoples and introducing them to a new world of economic, social and political progress!

As soon as the nations of the south gained their independence, they were faced with a classification of the world which ranked them third, in accordance with preset criteria made by the west in an attempt to persuade the peoples of the south of their innate backwardness and desperate need of the west. Those attempts generated in the minds of those peoples what one might call the liability to become backward.

Any attempt to analyze this phenomenon that has made its ascendancy in the western mind and that is based on the segregation between the self and the other on the one hand, and the hegemony over the other on the other, should be predicated on the western thought, based primarily on:

1. The distinction between the interests (the national interest approach) and the principles, and the supremacy of the former over the latter.
2. The distinction between power (theories of power) and legitimacy and the supremacy of the former over the latter.
3. The differentiation between the private (market mechanisms and the capitalist hegemony) and the public, and the supremacy of the former over the latter.
4. The distinction between the state and religion (secularism) and the supremacy of the state over religion, which is used sometimes to justify rather than to explain.
5. The separation of the executive from the legislative power and the supremacy of the former over the latter. Empirical studies indicate that over 70% of the draft legislations are advanced by the executive authority.
6. The distinction of the elite (elite theories) from the masses and the supremacy of the former over the latter.
7. The racial segregation between the whites and the non-whites and the right of the former to subjugate the latter.

8. The ideological distinction between capitalism and socialism and the containment by the former of the latter, ascribing to it names such as the empire of evil, until its complete demolition was secured.
9. Ever since the conclusion of the cold war a new rhetoric gained momentum on the inevitable confrontation between capitalism on the one hand and what was termed Islamic fundamentalism or terrorism on the other. The west is exerting every effort to contain or abort any attempt to deviate from the capitalist line of thought. Slogans such as the clash of civilizations and the end of history were in vogue and the west was depicted as waging its Armageddon, whereby the west was to emerge as a victor from the ashes of every other civilization, be it Islamic, Buddhist, Confucian, etc., the demolition of the Iraqi museum and the plundering of its priceless antiquities being only a case in point.

## **Second: The Failure of Socialist and Capitalist Experiments in Africa**

The western mind functioning on the exclusionary and hegemonic assumptions of the past has remained unchanged. It has attempted to impose its ideologies, be they capitalist or socialist on the African nations in the past and is equally trying since the end of the cold war to impose its neo-liberal ideology (political liberalism and market economy) on those nations under the banner of *good governance* and the adoption of market mechanisms, in stark contrast to the logic of democracy premised on the respect of the options made by others and the equal standing of those others. This new logic disregards the African economic and social context and deliberately ignores the fact that both capitalism and socialism had utterly failed when implemented in the African continent in the mid-sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, noting that those ideologies had been forcefully imposed on an African environment that was clearly not ready for either. Neither did those African nations possess a capitalist class capable of leading the capitalist transformation process, nor did they possess a proletariat which could lead the socialist transformation.

Post-independence African nations, which had mostly opted for political pluralism, had enjoyed in the immediate aftermath of independence appropriate conditions that were by far better than their current conditions, noting that they were not suffering from the debt burden of today or the imported food crisis and that they had a highly efficient administrative apparatus that was not crippled by proliferating corruption. Strong national sentiments succeeded in putting a leash on the eruption of ethnic conflicts. Those appropriate conditions notwithstanding, the capitalist experience (manifested in political and economic liberalism) was dealt a sturdy blow by the repeated military coups that became the order of the day, not to men-

tion scores of civil wars.

The question remains: In view of the failure of the capitalist experiment in the continent in the mid-sixties, could such an experiment be reasonably successful at this critical phase of African history? Could democracy be imposed and doesn't this reflect a de facto dictatorship? Does the west aspire to establish real democracies in the African continent, which are a genuine expression of the interests of those peoples and that are reflected in the adamant refusal by those peoples to be subjected to dependency and all aspects of western hegemony? Or does the west want to enforce a mutated and deformed version of democracy that only meets the interests of the west, allowing it to go on looting and plundering the riches of the African peoples?

### **Third: In Criticism of the Phenomenon of Democracy**

To start with, one should note that democracy is a phenomenon that is embedded in a western historical context, grounded on the economic and social developments of western societies. Thus, it should be noted that:

1. Democracy is not a theory, but rather a phenomenon entrenched in capitalist theory. One could not discuss political liberalism (manifested in multi-party systems, free elections, the transfer of power and the plurality of unions and syndicates), except within the framework of capitalism.
2. Democracy is not a supreme value as advocated by some, but rather a set of tools and mechanisms that allow all societal groups to express their interests within the framework of a value system in an attempt to coordinate those interests and to attain a minimum of consensus within the framework of the existing political system. Thus democracy is not a supreme value but a set of tools embedded in the value of freedom, the supreme value advocated by capitalism.
3. Democracy is not a form of state. One cannot describe a state as democratic or despotic, as much as one cannot refer to one state as evil and the other as good. A state is described either as a simple unitary state or a complex federal state.
4. Democracy is not a term used to describe a political system. Academically speaking, political systems are either parliamentary, presidential or transitional as attested by the various types of regimes in the south.

Thus and based upon the above, advocates of democratic transformation in the African continent are actually propagating capitalism. Can capitalism be Africa's option at the current phase?

### 1. The Phenomenon of Democracy is not Inevitable

Democracy has not existed since times immemorial. It is not a necessary attribute of human life and is therefore not an eternal phenomenon. Its content varies from one phase to another. It has been known in the Athenian city-state system, and has disappeared only to reemerge in a different shape after the industrial revolution.

### 2. Democracy as an Exclusionary Phenomenon

During the Greek era, women and slaves were deprived of any political rights. At present it is solely the prerogative of the white western citizen. The attempt by others to genuinely practice democracy is adamantly rejected by the west and is regarded as a direct threat to its security, the western support of despotic regimes such as the Marcos regime in the Philippines, the Shah of Iran, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and Mobutu of Zaire, are well known examples. The west was also the staunchest supporter of racist colonialist regimes such as the Israeli regime, the apartheid regime of South Africa and the former southern Rhodesian regime. The human rights rhetoric of western governments notwithstanding, African immigrants are persecuted in Europe, veiled women are subjected to enormous pressures and Islamic nations are forced to alter their identities and to transform their school curricula. The Algerian Islamic movement had been barred from power, in spite of the fact that it had been democratically elected. It seems that as the French poet La Martin had eloquently expressed: "The killing of a person in the woods is an unforgivable crime, but the massacring of an innocent people is to be considered." Reference is made here to the killing of a white western, which sets the whole western world ablaze, as opposed to the massacring of a people, a matter that could find humanitarian justifications! (The Palestinian, the Afghani and the Iraqi people being typical cases.)

### 3. Democracy as a Colonialist Phenomenon

The ascendancy of democracy was coupled with three other phenomena, namely the industrial revolution, the emergence of the nation state in Europe and colonialism. Neither democracy nor the industrial revolution would have been sustained without colonialism, noting that the industrial revolution was predicated on the plundering of African resources. The European regimes, which have opted for democracy as a way of ruling had to maximize their extractive capacities (thus the looting and plundering of African riches to enhance their distributive capacities and meet the minimum demands of the different groups within European societies). The phenomenon of democracy in Europe wouldn't have thrived without the

plundering of those resources. The fact that both Germany and Italy had attained their national unity at the closing of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had started their colonialist drive relatively late compared to other colonial powers such as France and Britain, had its toll on the size of their colonies, which were small and rather poor in comparison, in terms of the accumulation of resources. The two nations did not go through the democratic experience, as Germany witnessed the emergence of nazism, while Italy had to endure fascism. Older colonialist powers such as Spain and Portugal, whose colonies had been deprived in terms of resources, sustained their despotic ways until the seventies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, western Europe wouldn't have regained its democratic structure in the aftermath of the second World War without the Marshall Plan, that was designed to pump billions of dollars into western Europe, to enable its ailing regimes to meet the minimum demands of their different social groups, an experience without which democracy would not have been reinstated in western Europe.

#### 4. Democracy as a Secular Phenomenon

The separation of the state from the church and its hegemony over it, even the use of religion to justify political behavior (the American political discourse prior to and during the occupation of Iraq), is one prerequisite of a secular phenomenon.

The attempt to consolidate secularism within African nations stands in stark contrast to the African mind – a mind of affiliation and integration. Opening up the door to a multi-party democracy in a host of African nations would only lead to the formation of political parties along religious lines. Scores of examples could be cited to that effect such as the role played by the Catholic Church in Zambia's political life, the fierce competition between Catholic and Protestant parties in Uganda whenever multi-party elections are allowed, and the rivalry between Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. Religious parties made their ascendancy in Sudan (al Umma Party and al Ittihad Party), the Islamic Front in Algeria and the political role played by the Sufi orders in Senegal. Even prior to the collapse of the apartheid system in South Africa, the example of the Afrikaner Broderbond and their political wing, the national party of South Africa could be cited. *Could one thus cast religion aside in African societies and remove it from the political arena in the quest for a democratic transformation?*

Western Europe, it must be noted, had its share of religious parties, such as the German Christian Democratic Party. Some European flags carry the cross, and an oath is taken on the holy Bible by supreme officials upon their appointment to their posts, not to mention the phrase coined on the American dollar *In God we trust*. Jewish religious parties are dominating

political life in Israel and the very existence of the state of Israel is predicated on the words of the Old Testament, which seems to be perfectly acceptable and welcomed by the west, so violently opposed to the Islamic model of Iran. The west had also been a fervent supporter of another religious state, namely Ethiopia under Haile Selassie, whose constitution considered the emperor to be the head of the Ethiopian church. Meanwhile, western nations looked the other way and deliberately ignored the atrocities committed by the Lord Resistance Army in northern Uganda, who had caused by far more bloodshed than some of the scattered groups here and there.

## 5. Democracy as an Elitist Phenomenon

Democracy sheds light on political rights per se, as reflected in the freedom of expression, the freedom of association and demonstration, the right of suffrage, of candidacy and the freedom from arrest without due process of the law, etc. It ignores, however, the economic and social rights of the masses. It is thus an elitist phenomenon, which seeks to appease the elites, be they political or cultural elite, at the expense of the masses. Structural adjustment programs in Africa had inflicted severe damage on the African peoples, leading to the proliferation of poverty and unemployment, and the withdrawal of the African state from the social domain and from its commitment to provide education, health and housing services and the dedication of its full attention to multi-party democracy, elections and the transfer of power, as if those tools and democratic mechanisms had become an end in themselves, disregarding the actual interests of the peoples. Democracy, thus, like any other natural or social phenomenon cannot flourish unless the ground was paved for a proper environment.

## **Fourth: The Prerequisites of Democracy**

A look at Europe's historical experience reveals the existence of three essential prerequisites for the emergence and sustainability of democracy, namely:

### 1. The Economic Prerequisite

The necessity of an industrial renaissance that leads to economic development, manifested in urbanization, modern education, an updated administrative system and the interaction between different social groups.

### 2. The Social Prerequisite

The social consequences of this industrial renaissance manifested in the interaction between the various social groups in a manner which generates and boosts the value of national affiliation that surmounts every other affiliation, be it ethnic, religious, regional or cultural.

### 3. The National Prerequisite

It is predicated on the social preconditions, whereby national loyalties emerge and generate a national consensus on an ideological orientation,

which boosts the legitimacy of the ruling regime and renders national affiliations an inevitability.

These prerequisites had been the outcome of Europe's historical processes. European societies had been largely divided along religious, linguistic and cultural lines. With the industrial revolution came the transformation of those societies and the emergence of the nation-state, along with the consolidation of democracy. Without those preconditions, democracy would never have thrived and enjoyed sustainability. Thus attempts at enforcing democracy within another context had met with failure. Democratic experiments were doomed to failure in a host of African nations. This experiment is not expected to be sustained within nations that have pledged democratic reforms in the aftermath of the cold war due to the absence of the necessary conditions. Nigeria, for instance, had adopted political and economic liberalism ever since independence, within the framework of a federal state system, a parliamentary and a multiparty system. Those efforts collapsed in 1966. Nigeria tried then to embrace a presidential system in 1979, an experiment that was also doomed to failure. An attempt was made to adopt a two-party system that met the fate of its predecessor, the end result being its subjugation to a military regime for most of its history. Renewed democratization efforts notwithstanding, the experiment is largely unstable, in view of the proliferating ethnic and religious conflicts. This is the case in a host of African nations such as Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Sudan, etc.

The imposition of democratic reforms on a number of African nations ever since the cold war has reached an end, has led to the aggravation of civil strife within a host of African nations, leading to catastrophic results and the collapse of some states such as Somalia, Liberia and Guinea Bissau. Genocide was practised in nations such as Rwanda and the waves of refugees engulfed the African continent, which hosted more than one-third of the world's refugee population.

### **Fifth: What is to be done?**

There is near consensus since the end of the cold war at the cultural and intellectual level on the value of democracy as a ruling mechanism in Africa. In other words, there is some kind of acceptance of capitalism as a development ideology of the African continent, which is manifested in the constructive law of the African Union, as well as the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), not to mention the constitutions of some African nations that refer to notions such as good governance, the respect for human rights and the adoption of market mechanisms. Those orientations are based on the vision embraced by the World Bank and the IMF which considers democratic transformation as the means of attaining



economic development. The question now is: Is capitalism and the entailed democratic transformation a means of achieving economic development ?

The above analysis provides a number of comments that should be taken into consideration.

1. The democratic experiment carried out under the banner of capitalism had failed utterly in Africa in the early sixties of the last century.
2. The European historical experiment points to the importance of initially achieving economic development, which is the engine generating any democratic transformation.
3. Provided that the west is sincerely seeking to effect a genuine democratic transformation within the continent, the starting point would be a pledge and a commitment on its part to contribute to the economic development of the African continent, being the indispensable prerequisite for a democratic transformation. One cannot help but be skeptical about such an assumption, noting the reluctance of the west to extend a helping hand to the NEPAD initiative.
4. The materialization of real economic progress within the continent and the ensuing democratic transformation could instigate attempts on the part of the continent's peoples to rid themselves of dependency and western hegemony, a fact which might lead in its turn to the reluctance of the west to promote the development of genuine democracy within the continent that might impede its interests or at least secure a balanced relationship between Africa and the west.
5. Hence, democracy cannot be imposed, even though the west has tried despotically to enforce it in a manner that resulted in catastrophic consequences for a host of African societies. Amidst surging instability caused by civil strife, multinational corporations were quick to engage in the plundering of African resources, be they precious metals such as Gold, or precious stones such as diamonds, or strategic metals such as uranium or oil to name but a few.
6. The western research agenda sheds the light on gender issues, the problems of the marginalized, the children, the environment, etc. The salience of those issues notwithstanding, preoccupation with them could generate new conflicts that might overshadow the class conflict – the main conflict within the continent – and could impede the mobilization of all national powers to counter western hegemony.
7. The western mind as mentioned above is an exclusionary and hegemonic mind. Its rhetoric on the clash of civilizations and the end of history is logically entwined with the development of this mind that has exterminated whole nations (the red Indians in the United States and the Aborigines of Australia) and has excluded peoples (Africans) and colonized the great majority of the world's population. Without a real

deviation from its current trends and the acceptance of the other on an equal basis coupled with the respect for the options made by the other, orientations, norms and cultures, and the refraining from imposing its own ideologies, international relations in today's world would never be ruled by tolerance and mutual respect.

African nations (Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa and Namibia) have accepted white settlers as citizens and have shown respect for all their rights in spite of their racist colonial history. When South Africa formed the Committee on Truth and Reconciliation, it pardoned all those who had committed crimes against the black people under the apartheid regime. A similar committee on Truth and Reconciliation on the global level is needed now to record the confession of the west to all of its crimes against African peoples, the slavery, the colonialism, the racism and the plundering of African resources. The African mind is willing to show tolerance just as South Africa has shown it. Is the west ready for this great reconciliation and is it ready to cooperate with Africans on equal terms for the reconstruction of a new world?

8. Finally, African intellectuals should be aware that any ideology that does not seek to restore justice among and within nations and that does not serve the interests of the great majority is not destined to succeed and to continue.