



Governance and Democratic Transition

Africa doesn't need strongmen; it needs strong institutions.

—President Barack Obama

Address to the Ghanaian Parliament

11 July 2009

The social and political unrest in the North African countries of Tunisia (December 2010), Egypt (January 2011), and Libya (February 2011)—dubbed the Jasmine Revolution and then the Arab Spring—was the expression of deep frustration with centralized political systems unwilling to meet the social and economic challenges facing their countries. It summarized citizens' dissatisfaction with corrupt and failing governments. Successive Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan governments have deprived average people of their basic rights. High unemployment, the inflated cost of food, lack of freedom of speech, and poor living conditions—coupled with the confiscation of state wealth by small elites and their clienteles through corrupt systems—sparked revolts in Africa and the Middle East.

In authoritarian governments, as in communist states of yesteryear and today, the states control citizens by political authority and its security apparatus. The distinction between the wealth of the state and its rulers is blurred; the political class maximizes its personal benefits to the detriment of society. According to World Bank estimates, \$1–1.6 trillion are lost globally each year to corruption; however, “when countries tackle corruption they increase their national incomes by as much as four times in the long term. Business can grow as much as 3% faster, and child mortality can fall as much as 75%.”¹ Furthermore, the *Africa Progress Report 2013* notes that “Africa loses twice as much to corruption as it receives in foreign aid” but that “good governance will help Africa out of poverty, joblessness and inequality.”² Since they acquired their freedom in the 1960s, most African states have been governed by either autocratic or semiautocratic regimes. Nevertheless, Africa is far closer to realizing its considerable potential in both economic development and social progress. The major impediment remains a lack of governance that would permit Africa to transform its economies and societies.

Simply put, the concept of governance—the lawful control over the affairs of a political unit, such as a nation—describes certain forms of interaction between the state and society. Good governance recognizes the integrity, rights, and needs of everyone within the state. It offers a way of managing power and policy, while government serves as an instrument to do so. The United Nations emphasizes that “good governance has 8 major characteristics. It is participatory, consensus oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive and follows the rule of law. It assures that corruption is minimized, the views of minorities are taken into account and that the voices of the most vulnerable in society are heard in decision-making. It is also responsive to the present and future needs of society.”³ In democratic nations, a government’s main objective is to serve its people through institutions and good governance. Government is merely an instrument for the purpose of governance.

The Arab Spring and the dethroning of Zine al-Abidine Bin Ali, Hosni Mubarak, and Mu‘ammar Gadhafi, leaders of three of the most solid and stable authoritarian regimes of North Africa, offer two lessons. First, governments that are either unable or unwilling to respond to their citizens’ needs and to make transparent decisions will lead their countries to broader failures, corruption, violence, hunger, and poverty—and to their demise. Second, in wave after wave of protests, the emerging, empowered youth in the developing world have shown that there is no return to autocracy, bad governance, and corruption.

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Notes

1. “Corruption: Lack of Integrity or Honesty—Especially Susceptibility to Bribery,” World Bank, 2013, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/0,,contentMDK:23272490~pagePK:51123644~piPK:329829~theSitePK:29708,00.html?argument=value>.

2. Mantsadi Sepheka, “Africa: Governance Gets New Emphasis at Economic Forum,” AllAfrica, 16 May 2013, <http://allafrica.com/stories/201305161182.html>.

3. “What Is Good Governance?,” United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2013, <http://www.unescap.org/pdd/prs/ProjectActivities/Ongoing/gg/governance.asp>.