'Federalism May Be The Only Solution ...'

WHEN THE culturally homogenous and generally cosmopolitan Europeans brought colonialism into Africa in the 19th century, they avariciously drew up artificial boundaries. In that process, the fact that African peoples (like European societies of the Middle Ages) professed a variety of distinct ethnic cultures, each gregariously inhabiting its own geographically separate communal territory, was neglected.

Thus for no other reason than covetous financial and economic gain, European colonialists "unified" such culturally-diverse peoples into larger unitary nations. Consequently, it has now become commonplace all over Africa that an ethnic group which is a (numerical) minority in one state, is simultaneously the majority in the neighbouring state.

Over 30 years after colonialism, the African picture of ethnocultural stratification has not changed a bit. Neither has the Eurocentric approach by the developed North changed towards decolonised Africa. To date, affluent Europeans continue to obliviously adopt the same old Eurocentric (and Americocentric) attitude towards the post-colonial African ethnicity reality.

Today, European (and American) Governments, in their bilateral relations with sub-Saharan African regimes continue to be oblivious to the fact that, although sub-Saharan African nations maintain modern structures of government, the physical size of ethnic groupings is the determining factor as to which ethnic group was to become (and remain) the ruling class. To grasp the importance of the ethnicity factor, consider this 1989 Namibian electoral scenario:

In the United Nations-supervised elections, the Swapo party, which heavily depends on the numerically strong Owambo ethnic group for political support, garnered some 57 per cent of the total vote, although the party won only eight out of the 23 voting districts. The multi-ethnic Democratic Turnhalle Alliance (DTA) captured 14 voting districts, but received only some 41 per cent of the total vote.

There were 11 recognised ethnocultural and linguistic groupings in Namibia of which the Owambo ethnic group, constituting over 50 per cent of the Namibian population of 1,4 million people, is the largest.

Now back to the sub-Saharan African scenario. In many African countries numerically strong ethnic groups do exercise inherent power to appoint the winners of "democratic", if any at all, elections. During such elections, members of various ethnic groupings cast their votes for those candidates who are members of their own groups, rather than for those candidates, regardless of ethnic origin, who would be better equipped to bring about material improvement in their living standards as individual citizens. Hence, it is ethnic affiliation, rather than socio-economic conditions, which determine political power masters in virtually all multi-ethnic sub-Saharan African countries.

Obviously, the matter is not so much to vote against a specific socio-economic situation as to vote against a member of a different socio-cultural group. The implication is therefore obvious: in ethnically heterogenous nations of Africa, a candidate for the public office who happens to belong to an ethnic minority would never win a "national" election!

For sub-Saharan Africa there could only be two options in order to maintain democratic governance based on individual rights of citizens, either:

1. through gregarious and irredentist changes in the present geographic demarcation of sub-Sharan Africa
or
2. that each distinct ethnic grouping, regardless of size, should be represented proportionally in the supreme decision-making structures and that decisions be taken unanimously (by consensus).

Otherwise the principle and culture of issue-driven majority rule - as developed by, among others, French philosopher Jean Jacques Roussouw (1712 - 1778) - would not take permanent root in sub-Saharan Africa.

Another autocentric (and Americocentric) aspect by western governments is the practice or habit of making blanket generalisations, comparing, for example, a human rights situation under one sub-Saharan regime with a situation under another. However, in their own countries, they adopt a different criteria altogether and respect for human rights is evaluated against the constitutional and legal framework of that specific country.

Namibian independence came about as a consequence of a UN-sponsored internationally-negotiated peaceful settlement. The Geneva Constitutional Principles of July 1982, on which the 1990 liberal Namibian Constitution is based, were laid down by five western permanent members of the UN Security Council, commonly known as the Western Contact Group on Namibia.

Hence, the consequential socio-economic and political order in independent Namibia was never a product of spontaneous or genuine commitment - by Namibians who drafted the said Constitution - to a pluralist democracy and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, which are the main features of such Constitution.

Six years after independence, leading Namibian politicians have yet to ditch their monocratic and dictatorial tendencies of claiming exclusive representation of socio-political interests of "all" the people. Despite specific stipulations of, for example, article 1 (1) of our Constitution, these people continue to deceptively and unscrupulously tell the mainly uninformed masses, for example, that their (the masses) living standards would only improve once there was only one political party in the Namibian Parliament. They even go to the extent of blaming the Constitution and the judiciary for, for example, the police's apparent inability to control the high rate of crime.

Notwithstanding the democratic nature of our Constitution, the daily utterances of certain politicians continue to be conspicuously devoid of tolerance and moderation. Namibian Government representatives, for example, become instant "defenders" of the Constitution only once they are on the junkets to the UN and/or other similar international fora.

Hence, although it is a gigantic step towards a culture of pluralism and tolerance, the 1990 Namibian Constitution should not, by and in itself, be complacently regarded as a socio-economic and political self-fulfilment by especially aid donor states in the North, who should have known better.

In order to reverse this sad state of affairs in sub-Saharan Africa, those Northern friends, who are genuinely committed to see democratisation, promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms and sustainable human development should be told that the indivisibility and universality of such rights and freedoms have the same meaning to most sub-Saharan Africans, in exactly the manner as they have to most Westerners.

The only difference between Westerners and sub-Saharan Africans is the fact that African masses are generally illiterate and, hence, are deliberately kept uninformed of their individual and civil rights and liberties by the monocratic and reactionary regimes run by tyrants and dictators masquerading as "fathers-of-the-nation".

A state of mind regimentation or thought control of the masses is maintained through tight government-control of especially radio and television. Such control of the masses is maintained through tight government-control of especially radio and television. Such control is the central means by which popular uninformedness is perpetuated through pathetic inculcation of fear and suspicion, slander, character assassination, name-calling and intimidation.

More often than not, the reaction by the uninformed and impoverished masses is idolisation of such self-appointed fathers-of-the-nation. They are identified by their actions and their huge portraits are hanging in virtually all public and private places: in the offices of ecumenical bodies, hotels, supermarkets, airport lounges, hospitals, you name them.

The scourge of father-of-the-nationism seems to have its origin in societies ruled by tyrants and dictators and in totalitarian political systems. Several specific examples of fathers-of-the-nation could be mentioned: Nazi Germany's Adolf Hitler; Soviet Union's Josef Stalin; China's Mao-tse Tung; the so-called DDR's Eric Hoenecker; Communist Rumania's Ceaucescu; Cuba's Fidel Castro; Uganda's Idi Amin; Zaire's Mobuto; Ethiopia's Mengistu; Malawi's Banda. Zamibia's Kenneth Kaunda and ...it's coming too close for comfort. So, let me pause here for the time being.

Virtually all those dictators and tyrants-cum-idols have caused their portraits to be hung in public and private enterprises of their countries.

What I dare add here, however, is the fact that at least eight of the above-mentioned fathers-of-the-nation have since been totally discredited. Those who had monstrous statues erected in their "honour" - such statues have also been levelled to the ground by democratic forces in their countries. Those who are still alive are now hibernating in exile because they have become endangered species, wanted by their own people.

What is also interesting to note, however, is the fact that during their seemingly endless regime, they drew huge audiences who applauded, even if the supreme leader made an unbecoming public remark or called for the death of somebody or a group of people.

So, there is much more our friends in the North could do with their money and technology in order to help us bring about real democracy, equitable distribution of national welath, respect for human rights and the rule of law in sub-Saharan Africa. It goes without saying that most ethnic conflicts in this subcontinent erupt only once a certain ethnocultural group perceived itself as, or became, socio-economically marginalised. Such conflicts are the major cause of carnage and destruction.

Northern donor nations should please consider that, in order to avoid otherwise avoidable human carnage in sub-Saharan Africa, their official development aid (ODA) to African regimes should be strictly made conditional upon proportionate and simultaneous distribution to development projects in especially all communal areas in the Africam countries.

It would be in nobody's interest to redraw the borders of all the existing multi-ethnic nations of Africa. However, in countries where irreconcilable ethnic differences exist, gregarious partition of such "nations" may be the only curative alternative to further carnage and destruction.

Federalism - characterised by accountable, representative and transparent governance - may, however, be the only preventive solution for situations where ethnic tensions have not irreversibly degenerated into irreparable damage to national unity, peace and territorial integrity.

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