
Leadership Failure as a Drawback to Africa's Socio-Economic Development: Analysis of the Challenges and the way forward

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Abstract

Leadership crises in Africa has precipitated series of military coups, insecurity and other myriad of challenges various states in the continent have been plagued with since their independence from colonial subjugation. And these, as many scholars contended, account for the unenviable position of the continent in developmental indexes—like the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development index (HDI) which ranked world countries based on key developmental dimensions and indicators. With focus on leadership landscape, this paper examined the continent's developmental challenges, the efforts made to curb them at national and continental levels, and the way forward. Secondary data sourced from journal articles and published reports formed the bedrock of the analysis which, first, traced the root of the challenges to the balkanisation of the African continent during colonial rule, and second, showed the failure of the persistent experimentation of unrefined western models of democracy in post-independence Africa. The paper therefore posited that without derogating from 21st century universal leadership values, home-grown democracy that will inculcate African values and ensure inclusion of all ethnoreligious groups holds the key to ending the continent's leadership crises, which would in turn set it on track for sustainable development.

Keywords: Leadership, development, colonialism, democracy, Africa

JEL Classification: N47

1. Introduction

African continent was an object of over 200 years of slave trade, 100 years of colonial subjugation, and is more or less, now a nonentity in global developmental arena. Replete with poverty, illiteracy, diseases, internal conflicts and a host of developmental challenges, the continent is severely off track in the global quest to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the year 2030. But as a home to 54 sovereign states, vast untapped natural resources, over 60% of the world's uncultivated arable land, and the world's youngest (and fastest growing) population, it might have lacked anything but enormous potential (African Union, 2020). Befitting leadership, as many scholars contend, has since independence from colonial rule been the missing piece of its developmental jigsaw (Drimie & Kuwali, 2013; Irrum, 2023).

Due to some colonially induced contradictions and the self-aggrandisement of individual leaders, the experimentations of western inherited models of democracy in states across the continent have been largely unsuccessful. And this lack of success has resulted in incessant military coup (and sometimes counter coups) that deepened leadership crises in the continent, with its attendant implications on development. What further exacerbate leadership crises in the continent is what Carson referred to as ‘heritage conflict’. In his words, such conflicts: ‘have been too complicated, too complex, too hard to resolve, and they have dragged on, and on, and on’ (). But while ‘heritage conflict’ among people with a ‘triple heritage’—traditionalism, European and Arabic heritage (Mazrui, 1986)—is inevitable, responsible leadership is the only instrument that can, not just reconcile, but also turn it to a source of strength; strength that can convert Africa’s potentials ‘into real opportunities, into programs of action, into an Africa where programs can be turned into realizable targets, where ideas can be expressed, debated and tested’ (Kiangi, 2001).

By means of critical review of relevant literature, this paper adds to the ever-increasing pan African scholarships that examine the numerous challenges militating against the attainment of such desired state in the potentially rich but practically poor continent. Focusing specifically on the leadership landscape, the paper examined the continent’s developmental challenges, efforts made at curbing them, and the way forward.

2. Literature Review

Africa in Theoretical Perspective

States in Africa, their functioning, and their challenges with overall implications on the system can best be viewed in light of system theory. Developed in the 19th century by Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Talcott Parsons among other Sociologists, the theory, using the analogy of a biological organism describes the interdependent interactions among the various institutions of social systems, which determine the extent of their success.

In the 1950s, the system theory made headway into political culture studies (Britannica, n.d.). One of the most influential proponents, David Easton, adopted the theory in his ground-breaking work ‘the political system’ (1953), to expound the relationship between a political system and its environment. He described a political system as a conglomeration of inputs and outputs with the former encompassing the supports and demands of the citizens and the latter consisting of the decisions and actions of the public political leaders. It is these core factors that determine the survival and stability of a political system (Easton, 1965). Consequently, leaders would gradually lose citizens’ support when the former’s response to the latter’s critical demands are inadequate, leading to political instability and threats to the survival of the state. This explains the happenings in many African states which, despite their enormous potentials, remain in the back seats of socio-economic development.

In Nigeria for example, as support and demands (input) from the masses flow into the political system at local, state and national levels—through various channels such as the mass media and social media, —the overall response of leaders at the corresponding levels have, to say the least, been grossly inadequate (Adebayo, 2018). Consequent upon this dysfunctionality in governance across various subsystems, the country has continued to experience the challenges of unemployment, poverty, internal conflicts, rising criminality and terrorism in no small measure (Oluwaleye, 2021). With over 180 million extremely poor

people, it becomes the poverty capital of the world (Adebayo, 2018). And due to the operation of Boko Haram terrorist group since 2009, it has risen to the third most terrorised country (Institute for Economics and Peace, 2020). Ugwu and Mshelia (2023) have recounted how corruption and leadership failure cemented these unfortunate legacies since the country's independence in 1960.

3. Leadership CONUNDRUM in Africa

In light of the leadership woes that continued to plague Nigeria among other African countries, Joseph (1987) had referred to the political system there as 'prebendalism'. By this, he meant a system characterised by ethno-religious divisionism, abuse of power, and misuse of state resources by leaders and their personal cronies. More broadly, however, leaderships in Africa has been grouped into three traditions in accordance with the dominant characteristics of the individual leaders. These are the sage, elder, and warrior traditions (Mazrui & Tidy, 1984). The sage tradition is based on ideology with the leader presenting an ideological path for the nation to which the citizens subscribed. President Julius Nyerere of Tanzania who inspired his subjects with his Ujamaa (African socialism) ideology was an example of the leaders in this tradition.

The elder tradition, which equates gerontocracy is inspired by the leader's advanced age. It is deeply rooted in "the traditional African respect for the authority of elderly persons for their wisdom, knowledge of community affairs, and 'closeness' to the ancestors" (Dei 1994). Like ancient Greeks, Africans generally regarded their elderly people as the constituents of knowledge, wisdom and clairvoyance (Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998). Accordingly, the role of leadership in most traditional African societies was the exclusive reserve of the older members of the societies due to the belief among Africans that an elder can see what a child on the peak of the longest of trees cannot (Achebe, 1958). As one of the most prominent Greek philosophers (Plato) was quoted as saying in justification for such belief, 'it is for the elder man to rule and for the younger to submit' (Bytheway, 1995).

Table 2: Ten Oldest Serving Leaders in Africa

Name	Country	Age	Age at Assuming Office
Paul Biya	Cameroon	89	68
Hage Gottfried Geingob	Namibia	80	72
Alassane Ouattara	Ivory Coast	80	67
Teodoro Nguema Mbasogo	Equatorial Guinea	79	55
Emmerson Mnangagwa	Zimbabwe	79	73
Ismail Omar Guelleh	Djibouti	74	50
Nana Akufo-Addo	Ghana	78	72
Yoweri Museveni	Uganda	77	60
Abdelmadjid Tebboune	Algeria	76	72
Bola Tinubu	Nigeria	72	71

Source: Author's Compilation

It is partly due to this value that post-colonial African states have had various leaders in the elder tradition. Few among such patriarchal leaders are Jomo Kenyatta of Kenya, Kamuzu Banda of Malawi and Houphouet-Boigny of Cote d'Ivoire who enjoyed reverence as symbols of authority decorated by wisdom and knowledge (Kuusaana, 2022). With the age

of the oldest and youngest leaders in Africa being 89 and 44 as shown in Table 2 and 3 respectively, the elder tradition is apparently still prevalent in the continent.

Table 3: The Ten Youngest Serving Leaders in Africa

Name	Country	Age	Age at assuming office
Bassirou Diomaye Faye	Senegal	44	44
Abiy Ahmed	Ethiopia	45	40
Andry Rajoelina	Madagascar	47	43
Évariste Ndayishimiye	Burundi	53	50
Mswati III (A monarch)	Swaziland	54	18
Faure Gnassingbe	Togo	55	37
George Weah	Liberia	55	49
Adama Barrow	Gambia	57	51
Letsie III (A monarch)	Lesotho	58	35
Félix Tshisekedi	DR Congo	58	54

Source: Author's Compilation

The warrior tradition in Africa manifested in revolutionary military juntas who seized power from the elderly or sage leaders on account of gross mediocrity or outright deviation from leadership ideals. One of the leaders in this category was Gnassingbe Eyadema who ruled Togo from 1967 until his death in 2005. Few others are Muammar Gaddafi (Libya), Samora Machel (Mozambique), Thomas Sankara (Burkina Faso) and Jerry John Rawlings (Ghana).

The warrior tradition has been marred by the biggest irony observed in military's involvement in African politics. This is the fact that while the justification they often gave for their intervention was salvaging their respective country's economies from the grip of corruption, they, in most cases oversaw the most corrupt practices in the history of their respective nations. It was this, coupled with human rights violations that often triggered the internal and external pressures that resulted in the return of power to the civilians, and vice versa.

The Consequence of Leadership Failure in Africa

After the first three decades of civil-military authoritarianism and amidst the 1990s democratic revival, Adedeji (1993, p.) reported the situation of Africa as 'one of perennial famine, recurrent economic crisis, dictatorship, blatant violations of human rights, and gross carnage wreaked by merciless warlord'. After over three decades of democratic consolidation in the continent, a strong case cannot be made to the contrary. In other words, not much have changed with regards to the continent's fortunes in developmental landscape. The twin evils of poverty and illiteracy are most prevalent in the continent (World Bank, 2016; World Literacy Foundation, 2022). And these have sparked and fuelled crimes, internal conflicts, terrorism and other various forms of insecurity in different countries within the continent (Kimenyi et al., 2014; Ahmed & Kusaana, 2021). The implication has been socio-economic stagnation or backwardness as many developmental indices show.

With 33 of the 47 least developed countries in the world (approximating 71%) being in Africa, or sub-Saharan Africa particularly, the region is obviously the world's most socioeconomically underdeveloped (Wale-Oshinowo et al., 2020). This picture is clearer in light of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2022 Human Development

index (HDI), which ranked world countries based on the basic dimensions and indicators shown in Figure 1.

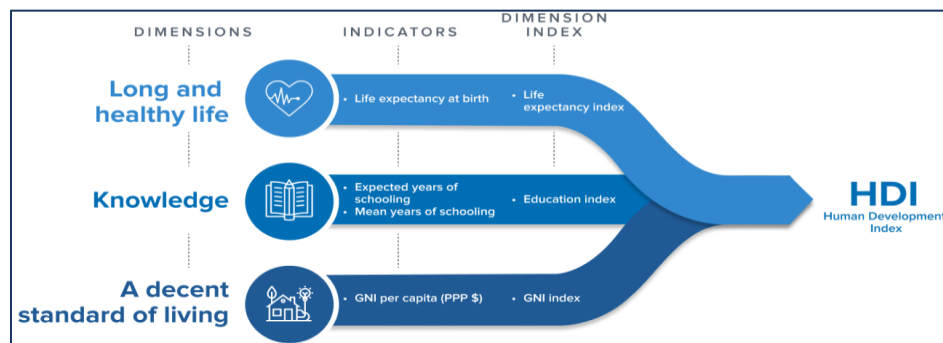


Figure 1: HDI Dimensions and Indicators

Source: Adapted from: UNDP (n.d.), Human Development Reports: Human Development Index (HDI). <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>

The broad rank categories in a descending order are ‘very high’, ‘high’, ‘medium’ and ‘low’ human development. None of the 66 countries ranked at the top of the HDI is African. In contrast, only four (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Haiti) of the 31 countries ranked at the bottom are not African. And as revealed in Table 4, all but one (Afghanistan) of the top bottom 10 with ‘low development’ are African.

Table 4: Human Development Index and its components: The bottom 10 of the countries with ‘low human development’ (2022)

Country	Human Development Index (HDI)	Life expectancy at birth	Expected years of schooling	Mean years of schooling	Gross national income (GNI) per capita	GNI per capita rank minus HDI rank	HDI rank	HDI rank
	Value	Years	Years	Years	2017 PPP\$		2020	2022
Sierra Leone	0.477	60.1	9.6	4.6	1,622	-1	181	181
Guinea	0.465	58.9	9.8	2.2	2,481	-13	182	182
Yemen	0.455	63.8	9.1	3.2	1,314	1	183	183
Burkina Faso	0.449	59.3	9.1	2.1	2,118	-8	185	184
Mozambique	0.446	59.3	10.2	3.2	1,198	2	184	185
Mali	0.428	58.9	7.4	2.3	2,133	-11	186	186
Burundi	0.426	61.7	10.7	3.1	732	4	187	187
Central African Republic	0.404	53.9	8.0	4.3	966	1	188	188
Niger	0.400	61.6	7.0	2.1	1,240	-3	189	189
Chad	0.394	52.5	8.0	2.6	1,364	-7	190	190
South Sudan	0.385	55.0	5.5	5.7	768	-1	191	191

Source: Extracted from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, n.d.): Human Development Index (HDI). Available at: https://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/2021-22_HDR/HDR21-22_Statistical_Annex_HDI_Table.xlsx

The gravest fallout of leadership in the continent is the perpetual insecurity and conflicts that have become hallmarks of the continent. In this regards, Cilliers (2004) contends that ‘West Africa, and the steadily increased levels of inter-communal violence in Nigeria present the most worrying future trend’ as he believes ‘Nigeria is slowly disintegrating, and the implications for West Africa are alarming and, as yet, unrecognised’. Since Africa is materially rich, boasting about ‘30 per cent of the world’s natural resources including gold, diamonds, iron ore, uranium, and cobalt as well as significant oil and gas reserves’ among

other things, it is plausible to largely, if not wholly, attribute its developmental misfortune to leadership failure (Irrum, 2023).

This is to say, while effective leadership that guarantees the security of lives and properties, as well as transformative development is the backbone of ‘social contract’ as theorized by Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Roseau among others, the failure of African leaders to adequately pay their own side of the bargain leads to the manifestation of Hobbesian ‘state of nature’—a stage prior to the social contract in which human life was nasty, brutish, and short having been characterized by unending conflicts and lack of development (Warburton, 2011). As Cilliers (2004) emphasised, ‘Africa’s security challenge, and to some degree its developmental problems, are primarily linked to the lack of state institutionalisation and political leadership’. And this seems more obvious in African oil producing countries, which include Nigeria, Angola and Congo. Rather than being in a developmental race with the likes of Qatar, Kuwait and others in the oil production venture, they continue to lag far behind, as they massively misappropriate the oil affluence. Citing Nigeria as a prime example, Financial Times (2008) reiterated that these oil producing African countries provide no good examples of responsible governance in the continent.

4. Efforts at Taming Africa’s developmental Challenges

Both nationally and continentally, alas with no obvious success, efforts have been made to get Africa’s developmental trajectory back on track. At state level, various leaders in Africa at different points in time have formulated series of developmental blueprints for their respective countries. A classic example of this is the ‘Ujamaa’ developmental pathway designed and implemented by Julius Nyerere, the first president of the republic of Tanzania. The Ujamaa—African socialism in Kiswahili—was an attempt to not only develop Tanzania economically, politically and socially, but to also restore the pride of traditional African values in order to build a developed nation on the ideals of freedom, equality, respect for human dignity and unity (Sanga & Pagnucco, 2020). However, the programme was at best “a case of heroic failure” (Mazrui 2005, Mesaki & Malipula, 2011). As Mazrui aptly explained further:

They were heroic because Tanzania was one of the few African countries which attempted to find its own route to development instead of borrowing the ideologies of the West. But it was a failure because the economic experiment did not deliver the goods of development.

However, over the years, the attempt by most African leaders to implement their different developmental blueprints are undeserving of such exalted tribute. This is because, they were western ‘transplanted models of development and politics’ that ‘fared very poorly in Africa’ (Mutua, 2016). Examples of such include the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) implemented Nigeria and other African countries. The programme, wrapped in Western economic values, was sold to them by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as a pathway to economic diversification, industrialisation and development. Being incompatible with African economic values, it not only failed to achieve these in countries where it was implemented but seemed to have exacerbated their economic distresses.

At continental level, leaders of African countries under the auspices of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) now African Union (AU) have made several attempts to uplift the continent economically, socially and politically. In the past, they had adopted different frameworks such as the Millennium Partnership for Africa's recovery Programme (MAP), the Omega Plan and the New African Initiative (NAI). As the ultimate objectives of the foregoing plans were not being achieved, the last, being a merger of the first two, was expanded to form an integrated, more strategic and holistic framework—the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)—which was adopted by the OAU in 2001 and ratified by the AU the following year. It was formed upon the conviction that:

African leaders have learnt from their own experiences that peace, security, democracy, good governance, human rights and sound economic management are conditions for sustainable development. They are making a pledge to work, both individually and collectively, to promote these principles in their countries, sub-regions and the continent (NEPAD, 2001, para. 71, in University of Minnesota Human Rights Library).

Having been adopted at the dawn of the new millennium, the NEPAD was expected to accelerate the traction of Africa's journey to achieving the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the comity of nations. These are the goals to: (1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, (2) achieve universal primary education, (3) promote gender equality and empower women, (4) reduce child mortality, (5) improve maternal health, (6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, (7) ensure environmental sustainability and (8) global partnership for development. In line with these, the NEPAD's:

Primary objective is to provide a new mechanism, spearheaded by African leaders, to: (1) eradicate poverty, place African countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development; (2) halt the marginalisation of Africa in the globalisation process; (3) accelerate the empowerment of women and (4) fully integrate Africa into the global economy (AU, n.d.).

One of the glowing attribute of the NEPAD is that, unlike the SAP and other alien developmental pathways, it is African in not only focus but also origin and character. As the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2012) aptly described it, it is:

The first comprehensive development approach initiated, implemented and owned by African governments, with the full support of the international community. It provides a vision of the kind of society and economy that African governments want to build. Furthermore, it is not only a development framework, philosophy or vision, but also a development programme with concrete projects geared towards addressing Africa's development needs and challenges (p. 2).

Though the NEPAD has recorded some notable achievements, it has not yet pushed the continent close to achieving the aforementioned objectives, despite the global continental race triggered by the MDGs and now the SDGs. With regards to the former, (Drimie &

Kuwali, 2013) rightly observed that the process of implementation in the continent between 2000 and the 2015 target year was generally ‘slow’. And as the continent eventually ‘failed to meet a number of the MDGs’, there is no guarantee the SDGs will be achieved (Adenle, 2017, para. 4). In fact, with a little over five years to the 2030 target year, the continent is severely off track the SDGs as states therein rank at the bottom of UN 2022 world’s SDGs index (Sachs *et al.* 2022).

The way forward

To move forward, Africa needs to look back, reassessed its past, and reconstruct its presence. The past, much like the present, was replete with leadership failure that precipitated ‘deprivation, disorientation and crises’ as analysed above (Kambudzi, 2001). The state boundaries arbitrarily drawn without recourse to social realities, and inherited western political system have served as the primary generating milieu for conflicts and leadership crises in the continent. They have made leadership in post-independence Africa more like just ‘a change of guard from white colonialism to African colonialism that carried forward the repressive colonial inventions which only served to pave the way for some of the worst dictatorships in the World’ (Mbire-Barungi 2001).

Therefore, moving Africa forward necessarily requires each state in the continent to find its right model of governance and development. And this must be undertaken on realisation of the fact that in the 21st century, democracy has become ‘an ideal to be pursued and a mode of government to be applied’ (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1998). However, the fact that Africa needs real democratic governance—not the façade of democracy some states adopted to deploy ‘innately exclusionary models of governance’ (UNDP, 2022)—‘does not mean that the models that the Western countries are promoting in Africa are the right ones’ (Kiangi, 2001). In light of this contention, scholars have advocated the need to complete African decolonisation project by amplifying the need for reform without a total restoration to the past, which ‘would both be unrealistic and retrogressive’ (Columbus, 2014).

It in this vein that Kari and Mshelia (2024) critiqued the democratic system adopted in Nigeria among other African countries, which, as they observed, ‘have been western in character, context and content and have failed to synchronise with the peculiar realities of the country, resulting in political crises, abuse of power, military interventions and developmental woes’. They therefore contended that purging them of Western influences and substituting them with essentially African values would ‘accelerate the process of attaining epistemic freedom for the system, with its attendant ripple effects on development’.

Conclusion

With the balkanisation of Africa in the 1880s, the seed of inter-ethnic rivalry and conflicts was sown, which made most of the artificially created multi-ethnic states (like Nigeria) very difficult to govern. It is observed that ‘Africa’s ethnic diversity has been appropriately harnessed neither by colonial regimes nor post-independence African regimes’ as it remains stronger than national bonds, and thus serving as a source of multifarious and intractable crises (Kambudzi, 2001). The biggest of these is the leadership crises that continue to plague the continent and continuously strip it of the politically stable atmosphere necessary for socio-economic developmental strides. The western political values persistently imported

and experimented in African states have worked more as hindrances than panaceas to the continent's socio-economic woes.

The continent, especially the sub-Saharan region, has remained the world's most economically backward. The solution to the continent's predicaments need to be explored in home-grown democracy, one that will inculcate African values, ensure inclusion of all ethno-religious groups, and leverage its youthful population to facilitate the 21st century induced paradigm shift to digital and citizen-centric governance. As the former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, was quoted as saying, for Africa to thrive in the global quest for sustainable development, it must:

Reject the ways of the past, and commit itself to building a future of democratic governance subject to the rule of law. Such a future is only achievable on the condition that we end Africa's conflicts, without which no amount of aid or trade, assistance or advice, will make the difference (Cilliers, 2004, p. 1).

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