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Kenya polls: Glimmer of hope in Africa's slide away from freedom

African

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It was when they jailed a friend of mine, the editor of an innocuous church magazine in Nairobi, that I first realised just how corrupt and dangerous was the regime of the Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi. My friend was a Kenyan of utmost probity who had dared to criticise the dictator in the mildest of terms. That was almost a decade ago and it set the seal, for me, on a raft of evidence about the malign influence of the man whose behaviour had already led his countrymen to coin the term "paramoia". In those days the British government refused to accept the growing evidence for fear of losing a useful trade advantage. In 1988, when she visited Kenya, Margaret Thatcher, the then prime minister, condemned as "un-British" suggestions such as mine that not all might be well with Moi's regime. Since then the evidence has grown inescapably. Whatever the outcome today when the results are declared in the election in which Moi has stood for a fifth term of office, the country which was once the jewel in the post-colonial crown is exposed as a miasma of corruption, favouritism, patronage and worse.

Moi's insidious fingers control the police, courts and media. Rape, beatings and mob killings are his tools; torture of political prisoners and criminal suspects is routine, according to Amnesty. The UN today ranks Kenya as the third most corrupt country in the world; a massive fraud involving fictitious exports of gold has reached right to the heart of government and cost the nation the equivalent of 10 per cent of its annual GDP. Kenya's failure to deal with corruption led the

IMF to suspend a \$216m loan agreement last July.

What is it with Africa? In next door Zambia the country's former leader, 73-year-old Kenneth Kaunda, languishes in jail by order of his successor. Nigeria suffers under the tyranny of generals. Elsewhere the continent is everywhere in the grip of civil war or the aftermath of it. In Malawi and the former Zaire populations are coming to the hard realisation that life after a despot is not much easier than before. Even in liberated South Africa increasingly disconsolate citizens are wondering when real change will come in their daily lives.

We know part of the answer. These were countries which were ill-prepared for independence by a colonialism which left them with imbalanced economies and an inadequate civil service. Next nature heaped on the challenge of climate change and excessive population growth. And then a one-sided system of international finance has added to all that manipulative terms of trade, an oppressive burden of debt and the the kill-or-cure pace of IMF-policed economic structural adjustment.

But there is more to it than that. The colonial period was too brief to develop in most Africans anything more than the most tenuous instinct for what democracy is about. It was not helped by the conviction in the early days of independence that the one-party state was the solution to ethnic rivalries inside the national boundaries which the Europeans had met in Berlin to draw across the continent: there are 40 tribes in Kenya alone.

But the Party proved a passport to the patronage which might have been effec-

tive within the tribe but which descended into corruption within the state. The West tolerated the fact because powerful dictators like Mobutu in Zaire and Moi in Kenya were a bulwark against the spread of Communism. But with the end of the Cold War the nations which controlled the aid purse strings began to demand multi-party democracy. The concept was so alien to many Africans that in Zambia a large number of voters thought that multi-Party was actually the name of the party which was to oust the ruling Unip party.

Even so, when Unip and its founder, Dr Kenneth Kaunda, were defeated, the father of the nation accepted the judgement of the electorate and stepped down. It was greeted as a victory for the democratic process but the rejoicing was premature. Kaunda's successor as president, Frederick Chiluba, is demonstrating a growing authoritarianism which is disconcerting. Elsewhere, in Uganda, President Museveni has won the endorsement of the West for his "good governance" strategy to respect human rights, stamp out corruption, and clean up his administration, yet he too refuses to allow other political parties to campaign in the country.

It ought to have been easier for Kenya and Nigeria, with their greater wealth and expertise. But those advantages have been steadily thrown away by consistently bad government. President Moi has amassed a fortune to rival the (pounds sterling) 5bn stolen from the people by his leopard-skin hatted friend Mobutu on such a scale that a new word was invented for this style of government - kleptocracy.

Moi also indulges in personal extrava-

gances — like a (pounds sterling) 32m personal jet fitted out in white leather. But politically he has been more supple. In response to pressure from Western aid donors he introduced multi-party elections in 1992, and then smothered the opposition in rules that distorted the spirit of democracy. That year he also virtually destroyed the Kenyan shilling by printing \$250m worth of unsupported extra banknotes to finance his campaign. He subsequently reneged on reforms promised in the run-up to the 1992 elections.

Yet, tragically, one of the factors which has aided him most has been the inability of the opposition to co-ordinate against him. An umbrella group, the Forum for the Restoration of Democracy, which had enjoyed majority support, split into rival factions when it came to selecting a candidate to oppose Moi. As in South Africa, it has been only the churches which have held together the opposition, monitoring human rights abuses and calling for free speech and accountable government. Their reward has been attacks on the Anglican Cathedral by riot police with tear gas and savage clubbings.

Yet South Africa also holds a model for a solution. It does not just benefit from a more developed economy and civil society and a larger middle class. It also has a helpful demographic. Though the ANC is the dominant party, the Western Cape is run by the National Party and KwaZulu/Natal is under the control of Inkatha. It has had, perforce, to learn the politics of opposition. But it is a lesson which the rest of Africa can only learn for itself.

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