

undemocratic oligarchy.

Thus the outcome of the current battle for power between the military and the people in Sudan is being viewed with great interest across the globe as well as in the rest of Africa since victory for one or the other side will most likely lay the template for the future of true democracy in the near future.

Africa and democracy

The current tug of war in Sudan is, too, a test case for the evolution of both the nation-state as well as democracy in the continent. One of the great myths imposed on Africa at the time of its independence was that it could and should democratise immediately. The failure to do so for many decades was blamed on the 'African character'.

What was ignored was the historical truth that neither the nation-state nor the institution of democracy are 'natural attributes', but that both need to evolve. Prior to colonisation, neither the concept of boundary-delineated nation states nor its concomitant forms of government existed in Africa. Group identity was based on language and kinship and effective boundaries were established by modes of living or natural barriers.

Governance in each of these entities had evolved over centuries of trial and error and ranged from monarchies to chieftainships. The prevailing social order was maintained largely by consensus rather than confrontational debate.

It was different in Europe, where centuries of constant warfare between kings and various princes had led to the creation of nation-states with borders, which often changed over time with conquest or defeat. Some of the nation-states coincided with dominant language groups, sometimes they spilled over.

Within these nation-states, the power dynamics rested between the heavily armed and organised lords and kings and the subjugated serfs, mostly peasant farmers and artisans. Although the concept of partial democracy had first been articulated in ancient Greece, the actual realisation of democracy itself took thousands of years of evolution and often bloody struggle to attain its current shape.

The concept of nation-states was foisted on Africa during the colonial period and the partition of the continent on maps drawn in Europe. But the practise of democracy was not extended to these nation-states – in fact, democracy was prohibited and the struggle for it was considered a criminal offence, for which many freedom fighters were killed or jailed.

After independence, Africa was left with nation-states it had not shaped, and were expected to easily slip straight into democracy. It was like expecting a child to instantly grow into an adult simply by observing its parents. It never happens that way – a child evolves into an adult with time and experience.

This to my mind led to the 'democratic deficiency' so decried by foreign observers. As had happened in Europe and Asia over centuries, those with power in Africa seized the throne and used their power, most often military, to keep themselves in it unless ousted by another armed group.

Natural course of social evolution

In this, Africa was simply following the natural course of social evolution that other nations had trodden before it. Yet from a political science point of view, it is amazing that so many African nations not only adapted to the nation-state but also leapt over the evolutionary ladder to become democracies.

Africa has been under pressure to cram several centuries of social and political evolution into a timespan of decades. At the same time, the continent has been playing catch-up with the rest of the world in technology, education, health, infrastructure, finance, food production and social and political organisation – all areas where, during colonial times, it had been shut out from developments taking place elsewhere.

It was being asked to move from subsistence agriculture and very basic industry – the only activities it was permitted to engage in during colonialism – and into the 20th century and to do so at breakneck speed.

The tensions this created led to the fracturing of societies and, in accordance with the laws of politics, the strongest organised armed group, the military, stepped into the breach. This yielded the era of military dictatorships in many African countries.

Nevertheless, the quest for an evolution towards popular representation was never abandoned and against all rational expectations, the majority of African countries somehow managed to bridge the gulf of centuries and become democratic. These democracies are far from perfect – but which one is? However, the fact that Africa has largely become democratic is, from the historical perspective, little short of miraculous.

But pockets of the continent, such as Sudan, seemed to have been bypassed by this evolutionary wave. It was not for lack of trying by the people, but perhaps the stars were not properly aligned. That is, until this current wave now unfolding in the country. It is led by the youth, who make up the majority of Africa's population. It is a battle not only for democracy, it is a battle for the dignity of the common person, for the birthright of every individual African. It is a desire to break through the ossified, outdated carapace that the Bashir era represented and move into the modern world as modern citizens with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities of their counterparts across the globe.

But no organism will willingly lie down and die and what we have just seen has been, hopefully, the dying lashing out from an outdated and oppressive system.

But democracy and freedom have always been fragile – always under attack from new manifestations of the urge to oppress and dominate. We saw this with the rise of fascism in Europe, when Hitler and Mussolini attempted to turn the clock back. We see threatening versions of the same malignancy today with the rise of far-right nationalism.

Thus the brave struggle of the people of Sudan is not simply their own concern, it stands for the constant battle of goodness and decency against the ugliness of oppression. Those Sudanese protesters and those who have lost their lives are heroes not only for the whole of Africa, but for the world. We should all take some time to appreciate what they are doing for all of us and to salute their heroism.

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