A Structural Solution to Africa's Wayward Presidents

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Abstract

The current crisis in the Ivory Coast unfortunately resembles a number of crises in Western and Central Africa over the last few decades. Whereas the international community has generally been more willing to intervene in Europe and the Middle East, there has been a tendency to "wait and watch" while humanitarian crises unfold in middle Africa. In the last several years, as in the Ivory Coast right now, however, global awareness of the brutality of such crises has expanded tremendously.

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The current crisis in the Ivory Coast unfortunately resembles a number of crises in Western and Central Africa over the last few decades. Whereas the international community has generally been more willing to intervene in Europe and the Middle East, there has been a tendency to "wait and watch" while humanitarian crises unfold in middle Africa. In the last several years, as in the Ivory Coast right now, however, global awareness of the brutality of such crises has expanded tremendously. Now information and communication technologies (cell phones, Internet, social media) are bringing the terror into living rooms around the world. The power of these new technologies should not be underestimated. Just as the historic and unprecedented Arab Democracy Movement of 2011 has spread like wildfire from Tunisia to Egypt and the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, we may see quicker action from African regional organizations and foreign powers than in the past due to growing awareness of the contagion effects (both positive and negative) of domestic struggles.

Of course, any international response to this crisis should aim to restore and keep peace and to bring Laurent Gbagbo and other perpetrators of these atrocities to the International Criminal Court. Yet, it would also be wise to deal with some of the structural factors that have led to violent conflict in Cote d'Ivoire's past and which continually plague the region. While there are many problems that need attention, one approach that should be given consideration is restructuring the government from a presidential to a parliamentary republic. This would be one means of reducing the power and autocratic tendencies of the state's chief executive. Presidential governments are often unstable because presidents want to stay in power longer than their people want them in power. In fact, several studies have documented how presidential regimes in Africa and elsewhere are more likely to collapse or revert to authoritarianism than parliamentary governments headed by a prime minister selected by the parliament.

Whereas presidentialism is conducive to adversarial politics (the USA is no exception), the structure of parliamentary government encourages a greater degree of power-sharing and consensus building, for example through the formation of multiparty cabinets. Parliamentary governments elsewhere in Africa (Botswana, Cape Verde, Mauritius, Namibia, and South Africa to name a few) have generally presided over more prosperous economies, invested more in the health and education of their populations, and improved human rights more than the presidents and dictators of most other African states. Of course, other political reforms are also needed, but the transition to parliamentary government is one that may bring long-term benefits to the Ivory Coast and its neighbors. When the Soviet Union collapsed and the states of Eastern Europe and Central Asia got to choose new forms of government, the former countries opted for parliamentary politics while most of the latter chose a presidential or semi-presidential system. The difference this has made is worth noting. Many of the Central Asian states have reverted back to authoritarianism, whereas Eastern European countries have witnessed a growing degree of democracy compared to their past.

That said, the Ivory Coast needs both immediate international attention and long-term support to develop a more effective and democratic government. Any plan to transform its governance should also consider political reform and power sharing throughout all West African countries,

including nearby Nigeria, to develop political systems more like the relatively peaceful democracies of Mali or Namibia.

Dr. Devin K. Joshi is an assistant professor at the University of Denver's Josef Korbel School of International Studies where he teaches courses on democracy and development. He holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Washington, an M.A. from the East-West Center, and a B.A. from Stanford University. His research focuses on the relevance and application of democratic and good governance interventions to improving human development and human security in the developing world. His recent articles have appeared in Economic and Political Weekly, International Studies Review, Socio-Legal Review, and The Human Rights Dictionary.