Leaders And Power In The Sub-Central African Region

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Abstracts: This article titled, Leaders and Power in the Sub Central African Region, is an investigation into the reasons for the long stay of some African leaders in power. The article is the outcome of data collected from some published works. The article reveals that some leaders in the Sub Central African Region have been in power for decades. Their being in power for long is attributed to some strategies which they have adopted. These strategies have helped to keep them in power for long, although some of them have lost legitimacy.

1. Introduction
Most African territories gained independence in the 1960s. Soon after, they were caught in the Cold War between the capitalist West and the communist East. The different protagonists of the War supported and sustained different regimes in Africa, including undemocratic or dictatorial ones, all in the name of gaining allies and achieving their objectives. When the Cold War came to an end in 1989, thus eliminating communist threats, the western countries that had dominated the politics of African countries put pressure on African leaders to democratise. At the Franco-African Summit at La Boule in France (June 1990), for example, the French government of Mitterand insisted that assistance to France’s former African territories will henceforth be tied to democratic reforms. This insistence, among other factors, resulted in the institution of some democratic reforms in Africa in the 1990s, including a return to multiparty politics and plural elections. However, the euphoria surrounding the institution of democratic reforms gave way to disillusionment, dissatisfaction, despair and despondency in Africa, especially in the Sub-Central African Region. This is because, among other things, some of the leaders in the Sub-Central African Region decided to cling to power, even though they had lost legitimacy and the trust of their people. These sit-tight leaders put in place different mechanisms that enabled them to stay in power for long. In countries like Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Chad and Cong Brazzaville, the leaders have been in power for decades, and have no plans of relinquishing power.

Ascension of the Leaders to power
The leaders of the aforementioned countries either came to power through coups or legally by constitutional demands. Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo came to power in Equatorial Guinea in 1979 through a coup d’etat that led to the overthrow of his uncle Francisco Macias Nguema. This means that he has been in power for close to 38 years. Paul Biya of Cameroon came to power on November 6, 1982, when the then president El-Hajj Ahmadou Ahidjo resigned and was thus succeeded by his constitutional heir Paul Biya, who was serving as prime minister before becoming president. Biya has thus been in power for close to 35 years. In Chad, President Idriss Deby came to power through a coup d’etat in 1990 that ousted Hissene Habre from power. Deby has therefore been in power for close to 27years. In Congo Brazzaville, Sassou Nguesso made his second come back on October 25, 1997, following a civil war that led to the overthrow of Pascal Lissouba. This implies that he has been in power, uninterrupted, for about 20 years. It is worth mentioning that while leaders like Obiang Nguema, Deby and Sassou Nguesso were re-elected in 2016, Paul Biya is still to decide whether or not he will be a candidate in the presidential election of 2018. Many factors account for the long stay of these leaders in power.

Strategies Adopted to Stay in Power
1. Constant Constitutional Amendments: One of the strategies adopted by these leaders to stay in power is to constantly amend or modify their constitutions to their advantage. Constitutional coups are very common in these countries. In these countries the constitutions have been amended several times. The constitution of Chad under Idriss Deby was adopted in 1996. In 2005 it was amended. The amendment abolished term limits for the president. A constitutional review in Cameroon in 1996 made the presidential term of office 7 years renewable once. It was this stipulation that guided the 1997 and the 2004 presidential elections. However, in April 2008 the constitution was again amended to give the president the possibility of standing for re-election. Article 6 (2) stipulates that the president shall be eligible for re-election. This implies that he can be re-elected as many times as possible. The constitution of Equatorial Guinea has also been amended several times. The 2011 amendment gave the president a 7-year term of office renewable once. In Congo Brazzaville, the highly contested referendum of 2015 modified the constitution to allow Sassou Nguesso to stand for re-election. This was in spite of the fact that under the previous constitution he had served the two-term limits. What is true is that, in these countries the constitutions are like documents that can be revised at any time. The revision is done to suit the regimes in place. Thus it is no secret that one of the factors accounting for the survival of the sit-tight leaders in power is their ability to constantly amend the constitutions of their respective countries.
2. Electoral Malpractices: Another strategy adopted by these leaders is to organise elections that lack credibility or that are marred by grave irregularities. Elections in these countries are seldom free, fair, transparent and credible. These regimes have put in place various mechanisms, at different levels, to ensure that election results are always in their favour. There is agreement among western countries, the United States and others, that elections in these countries are tainted by irregularities. Although the constitutions of the respective countries call for run-offs, the overwhelming victories
obtained during the first round prevent any run-offs. This is to avoid any embarrassment from the opposition political parties that may decide to form a coalition during the run-offs in order to defeat the incumbent leaders. For instance, in the 2001 presidential election in Chad Idriss Deby won 63 per cent of the vote in the first round. In 2011 he won 88.66 per cent of the vote, and in 2016 he won 61.56 per cent of the vote, all in the first round. In the 2011 presidential election in Cameroon Paul Biya won 78 per cent of the vote. In the 2016 presidential election in Congo Brazzaville Sassou Nguesso secured 60.19 per cent of the vote in the first round, while in Equatorial Guinea Obiang Nguema won 93.5 per cent of the vote in the presidential election of April 2016. Most often proclamation of election results in these countries is accompanied by contentions, protests and even violence, leading to loss of human lives and destruction of property. Given these massive electoral frauds or irregularities, therefore, it becomes very difficult to oust these leaders from power.

3. Overwhelming Domination of Parliaments: In any so-called democratic country in the world, controlling the parliament means controlling the state of affairs in that country. These leaders are fully aware of this and as such ensure that their political parties (ruling parties) assume overwhelming dominance of their respective parliaments. In other words, the ruling political parties endeavour to secure an absolute majority in the parliaments to the extent that they are able to pass bills favouring the leaders without any hindrance from the opposition parties. For instance, the Chadian Parliament (National Assembly as it is called) has 155 seats. Deby’s party the Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS) won 83 seats following the 2011 parliamentary election. The Congolese (Congo Brazzaville) parliament (National Assembly) comprises 139 seats. As a result of the parliamentary election of 2012 Sassou Nguesso’s Congolese Labour Party (PCT) secured 89 seats. The Cameroonian parliament (National Assembly) comprises 180 members. Due to the parliamentary election of 2013 Biya’s ruling party, the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM), occupied 148 seats. The Equatorial Guinean Parliament has 100 seats, and Obiang Nguema’s Democratic Party for Equatorial Guinea (PDGE) occupied 99 seats in the 2013 parliamentary election. It should be mentioned that these countries have a bi-camera legislature. But like in their parliaments, their political parties constitute the majority in the upper chambers (senates). The consequences of this absolute dominance of the respective parliaments by the ruling parties are that, the opposition parties are unable to vote laws that may temper with the schemes, machinations and positions of the sit-tight leaders. It also subjects the parliaments to the control and manipulations of the leaders.

4. Stifled Democracy: These so-called democratic African states exhibit a lot of shortcomings as far as democracy is concern. Democracy in these states is greatly stifled. Although the constitutions of these countries talk of respect for human rights, freedom of expression, association and assembly, and so on, the application of these constitutional demands is elusive or seriously restricted. In these countries there is censorship of the press and private media, a ban on peaceful protests and some meetings of the opposition parties, intimidation and victimisation of members of opposition parties, arbitrary arrests and detentions, extra-judicial killings, deplorable prison conditions, coupled with the fact that the forces of law and order act, most often, with impunity. These countries, especially Equatorial Guinea, are among countries in the world with the worst human rights violations, according to Human Rights Watch. These countries have instituted regimes of terror, and as such it becomes difficult for the opposition parties to force the leaders to relinquish power.

5. Institution of One Party States: Another strategy used by these leaders is to transform their respective countries into one party states or regimes. As earlier mentioned, in Equatorial Guinea the ruling party is the Democratic Party for Equatorial Guinea (PDGE). In Cameroon the ruling party is the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (CPDM). In Chad the ruling party is the Patriotic Salvation Movement (MPS), while in Congo the ruling party is the Congolese Labour Party (PCT). These ruling parties have rendered the opposition parties almost mute by reason of their overwhelming dominance of the socio-economic and political affairs of the respective states. These leaders of the ruling parties make sure that they are in control of almost everything that concerns their states and parties. These leaders are nicknamed by their militants “eternal leaders”, “the people’s choices” and so on. These nicknames help to make these leaders remain in power. This is because they erroneously think that they still have the support of majority of their citizens, not knowing that they have lost legitimacy. Moreover, these leaders (of the ruling parties) maintain a firm grip on their states. They are heads of state and governments (although in some cases prime ministers do exist but without sufficient powers), they appoint and dismiss the prime ministers and ministers as well as other members of their respective governments. These leaders are also the heads of their judiciaries, commanders-in-chief of their armed forces and so on. The leaders make sure that their militants occupy key positions in their governments. Given the firm grip of these leaders on their political parties, on their governments, on their judiciaries, and on their armed forces, it becomes very difficult to remove them from office. Hence they can stay in power as long as they like.

6. Use of the Military: These sit-tight leaders, as earlier stated, are heads of their respective armed forces. In other words, they are the supreme commanders of their armed forces and ensure that the military is on their side. They ensure the loyalty of the military by appointing their tribesmen and other loyalists to key positions in the military, by giving them good salaries, by instilling discipline and fear, by giving them fringe benefits and so on. While majority of the civil servants in some of these countries like Cameroon, Chad and Congo are complaining of being under paid, the military is well paid and well taken care of. These leaders use the military to crush every opposition, peaceful protests and so on. In other words, these leaders use the military, first and foremost, for their benefits, including protecting their positions. Thus with the military declaring its total loyalty to these leaders, it becomes very possible for them to continue staying in power.

7. External Support: There is general consensus among the Africans that these sit-tight leaders thrive because of the support of western countries. These leaders have established diplomatic, military and economic relations, among others, with western countries. These African countries are also endowed with a lot of natural resources such as petroleum, copper, gold, timber and so on, which are highly needed by
the western countries. Some of these natural resources are bought at cheaper prices, while others are gotten freely and illegally. Also, some of the leaders have allowed their territories to serve as military bases for some western nations. For instance, the Chadian capital, N'djamena, is the base for France’s military operations in the Sub-Central African Region. France has about 1200 troops in the area. Given the benefits which the western nations derive from these African nations, it becomes difficult for them to call for the departure of these long serving African leaders. For as long as these African leaders are willing to continue cooperating and meeting the demands of the western nations, the latter have no problem with continuously seeing these leaders in power. Some of these western nations merely criticise these leaders for the stifled democracy, electoral irregularities, human rights abuses and other ills, but do not take any firm action such as sanctioning them and their domestic allies. Therefore one can say that the support of the western nations is partly responsible for the long stay of these leaders in power. The continuation of such support, all things being equal, will cause these leaders to remain in power.

8. Shortcomings of Opposition Parties: Apart from the factors mentioned above, it is worth mentioning that opposition political parties in these countries have several shortcomings. The opposition parties are divided along tribal and ideological lines, coupled with the fact that they are financially weak, beset by infightings, chaired by sit-tight leaders, poorly represented in parliaments and so on. These defects or shortcomings presented by the opposition parties in these countries make it difficult for them to win elections, as well as to effect meaningful changes in these countries. Therefore it is not erroneous to say that the weaknesses of the opposition parties in these countries have contributed to the long stay of these leaders in power.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is clear that these sit-tight leaders have adopted several strategies to stay in power. It should be stated, however, that these leaders have made some significant socio-economic and political contributions to the development of their respective countries. They have instituted some political reforms (when compared to the pre-1990s) such as the liberalisation of political parties, organisation of multiparty elections, among others. Their socio-economic contributions include the construction of industries, roads, bridges, airports, seaports, schools, hospitals, liberalisation of the audio-visual sector and so on. These may have given these leaders some credence. Nevertheless, this writer believes that the contributions of these leaders do not constitute the main factor that accounts for their long stay in power, given that there are people who can do even better. Rather, their long stay in power is because of the aforementioned factors or strategies. It should also be underscored that, while the phenomenon of sit-tight leaders is very rampant in the Sub-Central African Region, it is also practiced in other African countries such as Sudan, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Angola and Algeria.

REFERENCES


