



2017: A Time of Small Big People

By Kalundi Serumaga



In the sort-of beginning, there were just two hegemony. Both white, both male and both nuclear-tipped. Now everybody, it seems, can try to be the ultimate tough guy.

Though this may not be a wholly new thing in our region, there is certainly a new flavour to it. The clear trend is towards macho posturing as a form of governance performance. Nobody is old enough to retire or considered expired. The use of harsh language, backed up by extra-judicial physical methods, is both a result and proof of this claim to virility and relevance.

In our region there are no meaningful democratic - or at the very least, pro-people - political processes taking place. 2017 may be the year this paralysis peaked.

In Sudan, where a home-grown national bourgeois class seems to have been in crisis and fighting retreat mode for decades, the current president has emerged from one type of siege (the recently relaxed economic sanctions driven largely by the United States), only to remain stuck in another (the indictment at the International Criminal Court). Meanwhile, economic and military difficulties remain entrenched, in particular, the government's ongoing war against its own citizens in the Darfur region, as well as the (to put it bluntly) ethnic cleansing in the Nuba mountains.

In our region there are no meaningful democratic - or at the very least, pro-people - political processes taking place. 2017 may be the year this paralysis peaked.

In South Sudan, fratricidal war shows no sign of abating, grimly echoing the poet Okot p'Bitek's berating of post-Independence African leaders:

"...while the pythons of sickness swallow the children/and the buffaloes of poverty knock the people down/and ignorance just stands there like an elephant/the war-leaders are locked in bloody feuds/eating each other's liver..."

Kenyan politics functions in the manner of cut-throat corporate enterprise, which comes naturally to this one-time beacon of successful African capitalism. Speaking to me in private, a senior and well-informed Kenyan public servant framed the entire NASA vs. Jubilee epic wrangle as the political expression of competition between two groups of cartels for dominance in key sectors in the economy, hence its intractability. True or not, it is clear that elections cannot be reasonably organised in such a toxic environment, and yet the "traditional" alternatives" - somewhere between mass civic action and armed struggle - are not viable either.

Uganda, stuck with one president for over three decades, has finally reached that moment one experiences while watching a rickety Nigerian movie and realising that all along the director believes that all the viewers are all fools, and is probably surprised that they stayed watching for that long. And then you cannot locate the "off" button on the player.

Kenyan politics functions in the manner of cut-throat corporate enterprise, which comes naturally to this one-time beacon of successful African capitalism.

Burundi's presidency, in seeking one massive term extension, is basically trying to become Uganda's all at once.

In Rwanda the citizens are the culprits; they simply will not let their president step down, no matter what the obstacles, be they constitutional or electoral. Apparently, they hold him a near prisoner in State House, and he has decided it's perhaps best not to argue with them.

The occupant of State House in the Democratic Republic of Congo has simply decided that it's probably best not to bother with elections at all, and has carried on for a whole year beyond their supposed scheduled date.

Tanzania's electorate - or perhaps just the political intelligentsia - seems to be caught up in a bout of buyer's remorse now that their recently-elected president has settled in. But behind the scenes, intense resource-fuelled contestations are taking place, fomenting mounting authoritarianism across the board.

A way must be found to help us understand this unfolding situation: Is this the future, or is it the past? We have to consider the possibility that we are on the threshold of a whole new political praxis.

In his Christmas address, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, criticised "tyrannical and populist" world leaders: "In 2017, we have seen around the world tyrannical leaders that enslave their peoples, populist leaders that deceive them, corrupt leaders that rob them, even simply democratic, well-intentioned leaders of many parties and countries who are normal, fallible human beings."

In Rwanda the citizens are the culprits; they simply will not let their president step

down, no matter what the obstacles, be they constitutional or electoral.

Since the demise of the Soviet/Russian side of the two-part global hegemony, there has been a slow return to naked political overreach by many potentates as they realise that there is nobody for their domestic opponent to seek support from in attempts to overthrow them. That game ended, and new language and thinking about what opposition means, and how to enforce it, has struggled to emerge. In most of countries in the East and Central African region, this gave rise to new dispensations regarding what the playing field would look like going forward. Some developments, like broader, more accommodating constitutional and electoral arrangements, or at the very least peace treaties between warring factions, were put in place. That was roughly two decades ago, we need to remind ourselves. A lot has happened since.

A way must be found to help us understand this unfolding situation: Is this the future, or is it the past?

Just under a decade ago, progressive writers living in the heart of the great big imperial machine, such as Paul Mason and Larry Elliot, finally began announcing the death of the capitalist system, confirming what radical African thinkers like Professor Dan Nabudere had been saying since its first modern crash in 1987. It took the drama of the 2008 crash, and the arrival of real “donor-conditioned” economic policies on their own shores, for Western thinkers to also recognise this. But contrary to what they believe, austerity measures are not a policy choice for the West; they are a survival strategy for the economic masters who are struggling to find a way to turn their global profit-making machine back on. This is where we come back in.

Capitalism’s zombie corpse now reverts to its original form: straightforward plunder of any natural resource that is either in the commons – like the oceans – or weakly defended by native peoples. The attendant environmental destruction is simply a side effect.

Our “leaders” have realised this, and have worked out that as long as they do not stand in the way, or better still, if they are willing to put themselves at the service of this mission, not much else will matter. Their emerging new praxis can be summed up as: seize ground, corral the resources therein, and then talk to the big US, Chinese or European Union corporations gunning for oil, coltan or fertile land, and through them, their equivalents of the Pentagon.

“Ground” can mean anything from some mineral-rich real estate (not necessarily located within your own borders) to a whole state, and even to somebody else’s state that you have managed to take over.

Capitalism’s zombie corpse now reverts to its original form: straightforward plunder of any natural resource that is either in the commons – like the oceans – or weakly defended by native peoples.

There now always seems to be a *causus belli* in the eastern DRC, requiring armed neighbourly intervention. However, analysts of the region argue that these have historically been largely excuses for foreign powers to muscle in on the King Leopold-founded tradition of looting the riches there, as happened in the mid-1990s, and is happening again.

Once the Pentagon – or its equivalent among the other big powers – decides that this is a good thing,

then their foreign policy will miraculously adapt to support this, or suddenly become incapable of seeing what is going on.

Democracy can now be finally safely jettisoned. Through the current stage-managed faux-democratic processes, we are transitioning away from what little we gained from the post-Cold War “good governance” aspirations towards a new and lethal state of affairs where anything goes, including the dissolution of the very state structures we live in.

Through the current stage-managed faux-democratic processes, we are transitioning away from what little we gained from the post-Cold War “good governance” aspirations towards a new and lethal state of affairs where anything goes, including the dissolution of the very state structures we live in.

This will still require skills, but of a different type: in order to be able to make themselves look big in the eyes of those over whom they seek to wield power, these “leaders” will have to hide their smallness in the eyes of those on whose behalf they wield it.

The ability to speak the language of global conflict entrepreneurs, as well as qualifications in Advanced Warlordism, will also be essential.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).



THE
ELEPHANT