Socialism in Africa

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The failure of Marxist-Leninist socialism, which has become clearly apparent during the past year, has done undeniable harm to the worldwide appeal of "socialism". Even concepts of socialism which had always expressly set themselves apart from "real-world socialism" in the Stalinist mould are also affected. The following article analyses the situation in sub-Saharan Africa.

In Third World countries too, quite a number of which had until recently placed great hopes in what had been termed the "socialist road to development", socialism has now lost much of its earlier fascination. However, the spectacular upheavals in Eastern Europe are not the only reason, for the erosion of the socialist ideal began quite some time ago. The main factor lying behind the change of heart was the relative lack of development success in those countries which described themselves as socialist, or as following the socialist road to development; many have now said farewell to socialist ideology, whether abruptly and overtly as in some countries, or gradually and tacitly as in others.

It would be wrong to tar Third World socialism with the same brush as Marxist-Leninist socialism, for the simple reason that, with just a few exceptions, the former always claimed to be far removed from any mere attempt to copy the latter. This caveat applies all the more to attempts to develop a "non-capitalist road to development" which stemmed mainly from the quite honest intention that equal significance should be attached to growth and social objectives at an early stage in economic development. Indeed, even where attempts actually were made to follow the lead given by "real-world socialism" the systems which resulted had a character of their own. It is therefore essential that developing country socialism should be understood and analysed as a phenomenon in its own right. This article attempts to do exactly that, confining its attention to just part of the Third World, namely the African countries to the south of the Sahara.

Readers will presumably be aware that "socialism" is a term which originated in Europe. When used as a description of the order underlying society, it can only be defined in terms of what it is not, i.e. as "non-capitalism". Any attempt to reach an affirmative yet generally valid definition of socialism necessarily fails because of the inability to agree on the concrete substance of the term. During the post-war period, socialism attained an extraordinary degree of popularity in sub-Saharan Africa. Paradoxically, the immediate motive which led many Black African nations to adopt the idea of socialism which had arisen in Europe was their wish to demonstrate African originality. Socialism, they argued, was in truth a quintessentially African idea, for pre-colonial African society, characterized by collective economic activity and grass-roots democratic decision-making, had been a precursor of socialism. So even if the term had never been applied to it, the substance of the matter was that socialism was inherently African, and it was only the name, not the idea, that they were borrowing from Europe.

All in all, it is possible to distinguish three chief motives underlying the African approach to socialism:

☐ The adoption of socialist concepts by African nations is primarily ideologically motivated. Africans, too, believe that socialism stands for an egalitarian, just, classless order of society, based on solidarity, encompassing a political system in which the leadership is pledged to the

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1 The author deals more comprehensively with this subject in his recently published book: Sozialismus in Afrika, Hamburg 1990. (Only available in German.)

2 The term socialism refers both to an academic doctrine and to a movement giving rise to a particular phase in world history, and then again to a certain system of society, shaped by the economic system which accompanies it. On this, cf. Horst Stuke: Sozialismus. I: Geschichte, in: Handwörterbuch der Wirtschaftswissenschaft (HdWW), Vol. 7, pp. 1-28, esp. p. 1 ff.

3 Even more than half a century ago, in 1934, Werner Sommert listed 187 different forms of socialism. Cf. Werner Sommert: Was ist Sozialismus?, Berlin 1935.
common good, the people are actively involved in the process of determining the will of society, and in which human rights and human dignity – especially the equal rights of different ethnic groups – are guaranteed.

In addition, Africans also had pragmatic and opportunistic reasons for turning to socialism. To add to their political independence, they embraced this approach with the aim of also establishing economic independence and signalling their desire to maintain a degree of distance from the West, particularly from their former colonial powers, while instead receiving "internationalist aid" from the Soviet Union and its allies. There are a number of cases in which there can be no mistaking the fact that allegiance to the principle of socialism was proclaimed because of the strong need to establish a political ideology which would legitimate the new rulers and promote the process of nation-building. Socialist ideology was recognized as an instrument for integrating, mobilizing and disciplining the people, and was deployed to no small degree to secure the authority of elites which lacked legitimacy and abused the undeniably positive undertones of the concept of socialism to defame any hints of opposition as "anti-socialist" and subject them to brutal suppression.

A final factor determining the African approach to socialism was a rationalistic motive, that is the faith placed in science by elites which had received modern educations and which were fascinated by the notion of "scientific socialism". They had a genuine belief that it would be possible to shape both economy and society according to scientific methods, and to rapidly transform African states into modern, developed industrial societies.

**Manifestations of Socialism**

Depending on which of the above motives were paramount in the decision to take the socialist road to development, a number of different types of socialism can be distinguished in sub-Saharan Africa. Before making any such classification, however, it is first necessary to establish what criteria should be applied when distinguishing socialist from non-socialist countries in the region. These are in fact relatively indistinct, but are as follows:

- A country's officially declared adherence to the socialist road to development,
- Some degree or other of affinity to the Soviet Union (and/or the People's Republic of China) coupled with a relatively pronounced distance from the West, and
- Particular elements of economic and social policy such as the formation of cooperatives, nationalization of businesses, price controls etc., which would suggest some degree of orientation to Soviet-type socialism.

Given that none of these criteria is sufficient in itself, only countries which fulfil all three of them simultaneously ought to be classified as socialist countries. Although there is always room for a certain amount of subjective judgement at the end of the day, a certain convention has now evolved as to which African countries merit the description "socialist" or "socialist-oriented".

If the very small countries with a population of less than one million are left out (there are 10 of these among the 46 Black African countries), 15 countries remain which according to the three criteria listed above have followed a socialist course for at least some part of their existence since independence. These countries can be divided into the following three groups:

- Firstly, the countries belonging to the first wave of socialism in Africa, which achieved independence by peaceful means at a relatively early stage and chose a socialist orientation shortly afterwards; this group includes countries with moderate first-generation leaders who might be described as "revisionist" socialists, who did not break off relations with their former colonial powers and were ideologically rather than pragmatically motivated to take the socialist route (Senegal, Mali, Tanzania and Zambia); the group also includes countries with more radical first-generation leaders who were largely pragmatically motivated in seeking a socialist orientation, in that it expressed either an extreme desire to break all dependence on the former colonial power (Guinea) or pan-African ambitions (Ghana).

- Secondly a special group within the range of countries participating in the first wave of socialism constitutes those whose leaders came to power in military coups and declared people's republics for largely pragmatic reasons (Congo, Benin, Madagascar, Somalia and, with some reservations, Burkina Faso).

- Thirdly, the countries participating in the second wave of socialism in Africa did not gain their independence until some time later, and first had to go through a long struggle for liberation; the socialist orientation of their governments was the result of Marxist-Leninist oriented liberation movements supported by Moscow, Havana and/or Peking. The group includes Angola and Mozambique (which resemble one another in many respects) as well as

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