

Africa's future

by [Wiebe Boer](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue

*The New Africa: Dispatches from a Changing Continent* by Robert Press

Nelson Mandela's release ten years ago from nearly three decades of imprisonment by the South African apartheid state was the sign that the so-called "third wave" of democratization that had swept through Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe since the 1970s was now coming to Africa. During the last decade of the 20th century the political structure of sub-Saharan African states underwent great transformations. These metamorphoses ranged from elections in which longtime incumbents were voted out, as in Zambia, to elections in which dictators were transformed into democrats, as in Ghana, to the total collapse of states in which no one emerged to take full control, as in Somalia--and, it now appears, in the Congo.

In the 1990s Africa witnessed 72 elections (there had been only a dozen or so in the 1980s). The political turn toward democratization was given further credence by the 1999 vote by the Organization of African Unity declaring that heads of state who come to power illegitimately will not be permitted to attend the OAU's annual summit for African political leaders. Academics, journalists, politicians, development experts and other analysts are still trying to understand how and why all of these changes came about.

The *Christian Science Monitor's* Africa correspondent, Robert Press, spent much of the 1990s bouncing around Africa, reporting on crisis after crisis. His book attempts to capture the decade's events concisely, bringing a message of hope about Africa's future in spite of all the continent's problems. He argues that the monumental changes in Africa in the 1990s were more dramatic than those of any other period in recent memory, and that the reason for these changes was a greater desire for freedom on the part of the average African.

Both of these points easily can be challenged. Although the 1990s did indeed bring about dramatic changes in African political structures, in the context of the entire range of African history these changes do not appear nearly so revolutionary. In the 19th century Africans were conquered, colonized and arranged into appendages of

European nation-states, with random boundaries they had no voice in delineating. With these new arrangements came new languages, a new religion, new educational systems, new modes of production, new markets, new products, new identities, new cultural forms and much more. Through various, often competing forms of adaptation, adoption, resistance and hybridization, these new developments were adjusted and Africanized.

Then in the mid-20th century the wheel of revolution led to decolonization and newly gained freedom. But within a decade of independence most Africans found themselves again without political freedoms. The only difference was that this time the domination was by indigenous rather than foreign rulers. When Africans inherited the reins of power they simply Africanized the undemocratic, centralized, coercive African colonial states into African postcolonial states. Then, three decades after decolonization, the wheel of revolution began turning again, leading to the changes of the 1990s. In this sense, then, the 1990s were not as significant a transformation as Press and many others might have us believe. They were simply part of the much longer process of change through which Africans have lived over many years.

The 1990s also were not necessarily a time when Africans had a greater desire for freedom than ever before. Though superficially Africans may appear to have been rather passive, choosing to suffer quietly rather than to rise up in massive rebellion, the struggle for freedom and independence has always been an important part of African life.

Until recently, Africa was one of the most underpopulated continents. The average African was and still is a farmer, and once there was plenty of land available. Any time a city or a state became powerful enough to control a vast piece of territory, it would need to establish a system of taxation to enable it to govern. Overtaxed Africans could vote with their feet, leaving the territory to find farmland elsewhere. The relatively "uncaptured" African peasant was the bane of kingdom--and empire--builders. The inability to procure vast amounts of tax revenue and labor made it almost impossible for kingdoms to last long, or to build lasting monuments to their memories.

Tourists in Europe or Asia may marvel at all the architectural wonders that surround them. But those very wonders are also symbols of oppressive and overbearing states that could coerce hundreds of thousands to spend their lives laboring on

projects erected to enhance the ruling class. Africa's lack of such structures is a monument in itself, a monument to the adaptivity and resistance of Africans. When Europeans colonized the continent, they faced the same problems as did the African state builders before them. Their attempts to tax, govern and make a profit were often thwarted not by massive rebellions, but by everyday forms of resistance. By walking away, planting the wrong crops, filling rubber and cotton quotas with rocks and sand, smuggling produce across colonial borders, or simply not cooperating, Africans made colonial domination impossible and unprofitable. Coming to terms with their inability to properly monitor and manipulate their citizens as effectively as Western governments do is one of the problems African leaders still face as they try to build modern states.

If the events of the 1990s indicated a hopeful future for Africa, then how does one explain the kinds of tragedies that occurred in Somalia and Rwanda, tragedies to which Press gives much attention? What happened in Somalia and Rwanda exemplifies for most of the Western world everything that is wrong with Africa. Though the international media portrayed the conflicts as natural outcomes of Africa's allegedly primitive nature, these conflicts were in fact very modern events, and the people involved were heavily influenced by Western culture and education.

When Somalia's Siad Barre was overthrown in 1991, no clear leader was available to take his place. Abukar Ali Mohamed, sitting on the turret of one of the tanks liberated from Barre's defeated army, told Press, "I shot a lot of people--to get democracy and make Somalia free from the dictatorship of Barre." Press writes, "He had accomplished half of his goal: Barre was gone. The other half--democracy--would have to wait." And wait it has.

In the civil war that followed Barre's overthrow, various factions fought for control of Somalia, a famine developed and thousands began to starve. The factions in the fighting thwarted the efforts of aid organizations to distribute relief supplies. After much delay the United Nations sent a peacekeeping force whose mission it was to "Restore Hope" and avert more starvation. Thousands were indeed saved, but the mission changed into the political one of capturing faction leader Muhammad Farah Aideed. This, according to Press, was a tragic mistake which later resulted in inaction on the part of the international community in averting the Rwandan genocide. The U.S.-led UN force all but pulled out of Somalia in 1994, the crises still unresolved.

Press attributes much of the failure of the UN force to its inability to understand Somalians and their conflict. Are Somalians really that hard to comprehend, or was it simply that the West did not try hard enough? Would a Nigerian or Pakistani-led force do any better? Are Somalis too distant from any other mindset to be either helpable or defeatable? It certainly seems that way from many of the descriptions of Somalis and Somalia, unless one digs a little deeper. Press tells us that Hussein Muhammad Aideed, the son and head of security for Muhammad Farah Aideed, was formerly a U.S. Marine. One of Aideed's wives lived in Toronto and several of his children had Canadian citizenship. He was a modern man with many connections to the very international community that could not understand or capture him. How did he figure out how to outwit the Americans? Probably by watching CNN International, or by listening to Voice of America and BBC broadcasts, which for many Africans are the sources of local as well as international news.

Many of the young fighters who committed the horrific acts of brutality in the civil war in Sierra Leone used the American movie character Rambo as a role model. Johnny Garang, the leader of the Sudanese People's Liberation Army, attended Iowa's Grinnell College and earned a Ph.D. from Iowa State. Pierre Buyoya, a former military leader of Burundi who was restored to power in a 1996 coup, orchestrated his return to power from New Haven, Connecticut, where he was a visiting scholar at Yale. Harvard was formerly the home of Professor Ernest Wamba-dia-Wamba, a graduate of Brandeis University and the leader of the Kisanganian faction of the Rally for Congolese Democracy.

What happened in Rwanda, too, was not the result of some incomprehensible, primordial African tribal conflict, but of very modern developments. Even the ethnic distinction between the now infamous Tutsis and Hutus is a recent creation, stemming from European misreadings of African class differentiations as ethnic differentiations. To put it very simply, the Tutsis were the upper class and the Hutus were the lower class, but a Hutu could become a Tutsi and vice versa. Hatreds built up over decades of colonial preferences for the supposedly superior Tutsi led to the 1959 ethnic clashes which put Hutus in charge of the country after independence and sent many Tutsis to Uganda, where they bided their time for a return.

The genocide itself--the Rwandan Hutus' final solution aimed at destroying the Tutsis--was a very modernist endeavor, highly organized and using tools of mass propaganda to incite hysteria and ethnic hatred. The international community, feeling burnt by Somalia, failed to respond in time and over 500,000 Rwandans were

murdered. The Hutus did not succeed in wiping out the Tutsi, however, and the displaced Tutsis who had been in exile in Uganda since 1959 returned and swept into power. Two of the key figures who delayed the international response--Kofi Annan and Madeleine Albright--remained in positions of immense power. The entire region is still in turmoil.

As troubling as the regional turmoil in parts of Africa might be, grounds for hope can be found in a number of areas, including the people themselves. The best part of Press's book is his stories of average individuals.

We read about Sinaly Dembele and Djibril Coulibaly, two out of the thousands of students who were instrumental in overthrowing the dictator of Mali in the almost unknown Malian three-day revolution in 1991. We learn about Djovi Gally and Logo Dossouvi, ordinary men who stood up to Togolese dictator Etienne Eyadema and forced changes. Press tells the stories of well-known Nigerian pro-democracy activists such as Beko Ransome-Kuti and now President Olusegun Obasanjo, but also of lesser-known activists such as Jiti Ogunye and Sylvester Odion, and of Nike Davies, a woman involved in a liberation struggle of a very different kind.

In Kenya, where Press was based, the protest of ordinary mothers like Monica Wamwere and Njeri Kababere against the illegal incarceration of their sons led to police crackdowns, but also to ultimate victory. Peter Chege struggled to pull himself out of abject poverty and life on the Nairobi streets to become a tailor. Before he could succeed, however, he died of AIDS. Even so, his is a story of hope, promise and potential. That hope about Africa is the most important message that needs to be spread, even while the continent suffers from AIDS, wars and poverty. Without that message of hope, people--including Africans themselves--might give up on Africa altogether. Part of that message of hope can be found in a poignant photograph in Press's book, which shows in the midst of a bombed-out school building in Somalia, without a roof, chairs or desks and nearly without walls, that teachers continue to teach and children continue to learn.

An important part of the hope, almost totally neglected in *The New Africa*, is the spread of Christianity. Africa already has an estimated 350 million Christians, and by 2025 is expected to have more Christians than any other continent. Christianity in Africa is growing at such a fast pace that places of worship cannot be built quickly enough and preachers and evangelists cannot be trained fast enough to keep up. This, too, is why Africa should be important to Christians worldwide. By the end of

the 21st century, the very shape of world Christianity will likely be decided by what happens in the African church. Are Western Christians ready for African popes, missionaries and theologians? They had better start getting prepared.

Of course, a large Christian population does not in itself mean that anything will change for Africa. Frederick Chiluba, one of the early darlings of Africa's swing toward democracy, declared his country, Zambia, to be the world's only officially Christian nation before he plunged Zambia into turmoil--with mismanagement, corruption and baiting of the opposition. The presence of many Christians in Rwanda did nothing to forestall the genocide there.

Yet vast numbers of Christians and churches bring a message of Christian reconciliation and peace, a message that was instrumental in preventing massive bloodshed in South Africa's transition. Furthermore, the church is a source of hope in times of turmoil and a source of concrete assistance in times of suffering. Even though the apolitical health-and-wealth gospel of Pentecostalism is spreading like wildfire across the continent, the more mainline mission-derived churches have shed their apolitical past. These churches, both Catholic and Protestant, are becoming influential centers of civil society and political opposition to undemocratic and autocratic governments. On a continent in which neither civil society nor political opposition is as yet well developed, the churches play an important role.

If democracy is the route to a more just society and a brighter future for the average person, then Africa is certainly on the threshold of a promising century. Many reasons have been offered for the dramatic changes in Africa at the close of the 20th century. One suggestion is that it was a simple case of contagion. Once democratization began spreading, Africans took up the cause. Another explanation is that old-guard politicians whose skills were not exportable wanted a chance to get back into the political arena. Under this theory, then, change was motivated by self-interest. Others have argued that as autocratic regimes increasingly lost legitimacy in the post-cold-war world, African dictators found it harder and harder to secure foreign aid and loans. Their dwindling international legitimacy and inability to maintain their patronage networks combined to undermine their regimes. Another explanation is that ordinary people involved in everyday struggles brought down the dictators, motivated by, as Cameroonian scholar Celestin Monga so eloquently put it, "the desire to survive madness, the quest for another, better world, and the confidence that the worst is never inevitable."

Scholars have warned us not to become overly optimistic about the spread of democracy in Africa. Democracy does not happen over night. Before African countries can be truly democratized they need to develop systems that make sense within their particular cultural and historical contexts. In their analysis of Africa's democratic transitions, Michael Bratton and Nicholas van de Walle, both of Michigan State University, argue that most of the causes were internal. However, they contend that the patrimonial governing style of the dictatorships that preceded the transitions will continue in the democratic governments, restraining the level of real change. Another warning is that questioning domestic political arrangements may lead to questioning the desirability of the state itself. This, unfortunately, is already taking place in Nigeria.

As an explanation for the demise of the cold war, renowned historian John Gaddis uses a metaphor from nature. He takes an example from Stephen Jay Gould, who talks about a type of fish that thrived for millions of years, completely adapted to its environment, until the pond in which it dwelt dried up. Gaddis suggests that perhaps the cold war ended when it did "because that conflict just happened to take place at the moment in history when the conditions that had for thousands of years favored authoritarianism suddenly ceased to do so. Perhaps the pond simply dried up." Perhaps that was also the case for Africa, and the average African was ready and waiting at that historical moment to take up the challenge. A Sotho proverb goes, "The fish, seeing the water has dried up, struggles mightily in the mud." Let us hope that the African authoritarian fish remains stuck in the mud.