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Neopatrimonialism in Contemporary African Politics

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ANA HUERTAS FRANCISCO, JAN 24 2010

To what extent can Neopatrimonialism be Considered Significant in Contemporary African Politics?

Neopatrimonialism is the vertical distribution of resources that gave rise to patron-client networks based around a powerful individual or party. Once argued to be necessary for unification and development after decolonization, these regimes have supplanted the role of the inherited colonial institutions for the benefit of a few individuals. It is significant nowadays because it affects almost all sub-Saharan states to differing degrees and is not regarded as corrupt behaviour by the population, who rely on the system for their own survival. Neopatrimonialism affects policy making, especially development projects, and is responsible for the misuse of aid and state budgets.

Neopatrimonialism has been argued by many to be the fundamental (and even inherent and inevitable) impediment that prevents African societies from evolving from their primary export economies (Darnton, 1994). The extent to which this is true and whether the term can be useful at all when exploring the manner in which African politics are carried out is arguable (Theobald, 1982). As defined by Thomson (2004: 127), *patronage* consists on the centralization of power on "an individual to whom all within the system owe their position": basically, "an exchange relationship between unequals" (Boas, 2001: 700). It is a political regime based on the personal use of one man or party of public resources and the preferential (instead of meritocratic) appointment of civil servants and, as Fredslund (2000) points out, this could be interpreted as manifest corrupt practices and illegitimate behaviour according to the inter-national community.

For Weber however, patrimonialism is "not a synonym for corruption, "bad governance," violence, or evidence of a weak state" (Weber, 1947 quoted in Pitcher, Moran and Johnston, 2009: 126): it is rather a distinct form of acquiring state legitimacy and of tackling difficulties in statecraft specific to Africa, whose dynamics were already deeply rooted in the continent "since pre-colonial times" (Berman, 1998: 305). *Neopatrimonialism* (or *modern* patrimonialism, Erdmann and Engel: 2006) thus arises where patronage politics have managed to "supplant the legal-rational apparatus" (the adopted bureaucratic institutions) imposed on African nations during the colonial era (Nawaz: 2008: 2). This has given birth to "hybrid" states, where modern formal institutions exist alongside regimes "based on the giving and granting of favours" (Cromwell and Chintedza, 2005: 2) and where the public/private dichotomy in policy decisions and resource distribution becomes hard to distinguish.

The significance of Neopatrimonialism and the extent to which it has permeated African politics requires deep exploration. The latest *Afro-barometer briefing* illustrates how, although there is considerable diversity in forms of governmental activity across the continent (ranging from quasi-democratic to authoritarian), today "most political regimes in Africa are unconsolidated hybrid systems", and that *all* regimes have been considered, at one point or another, as patrimonial or neopatrimonial in nature by academics (Bratton and Mattens, 2009: 2). Furthermore, Bratton and van de Walle have claimed that neopatrimonial practices are not just a characteristic of the African regimes, but rather "the *core* feature of post-colonial politics in Africa" (1997: 3). Pitcher, Moran and Johnston argue that the evident popularity of this type of regime persists because it keeps being presented by leaders as "an inevitable stage in some linear progression", necessary to evolve away from the "backwardness" label imposed on sub-Saharan countries after decolonization (2009: 128).

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It is true that, after independence, liberation movements found themselves leading fragmented and very young states, and thus the “Africanisation of the bureaucracy” in the form of authoritarian patrimonialism took place (Erdmann and Engels: 2006) to ensure unity and economic strength in these weak states. Although the dynamics of neopatrimonialism may cause rejection from a more rational point of view, we should understand that its contemporary importance lies in the constant “uncertainty” that people in Africa find themselves in (ibid, 21) to ensure their survival and that of their community (Boas, 2001). A phenomenon known as “economies of affection” (Morris, 2003) has always existed in countries such as Ghana, Kenya or the former Zaire, and it describes the African usage of patron-client networks “as a means of facilitating moral, social and economic support among the indigent rural people” (Singh, 1999: 467) based on “blood, kin, community or other affinities” (Hayden, 1983: 9). Patron-client networks became accepted, and therefore indispensable: they provide protection not only for the individual, but also for the community. The system grants access to resources or labour for individuals, and their wealth would (hopefully) later trickle-down for the benefit of the whole community (Osseo-Asare, 1984).

Neopatrimonialism is also significant in terms of policy design and implementation. Neopatrimonial politics have developed the capacity of being able to divert public resources (from national tax revenues and aid funds) for private lucrative gain, “undermining development possibilities already restricted by social and economic constraints” (Cromwell and Chintedza, 2005: 3). In the case of Zambia, neopatrimonialism has continued even after the abolition of the one-party rule and is still regarded as an important mechanism for ensuring continued support for the ruling party and access to resources (ibid: 4). Development policies are designed accordingly, where food and agricultural projects are devised to suit “neopatrimonial logic rather than objectives of food security or poverty reduction” (deGrassi, 2008: 108). In the long term, this presupposes low degrees of security and development, ensuring the continuity of the system as the only means for survival at all stages in the social ladder (Cammack, 2007).

Neopatrimonialism is the foundation stone for the system which drives African politics. Although some academics argue that it is a sign of underdevelopment and backwardness or the phenomenon that prevents development from taking place, others have insisted that it is a political system that fits African social frameworks. Patronage networks were deeply engrained in the continent before colonialism, and therefore it should not be surprising to discover how new parties have managed to adapt the inherited post-colonial foreign bureaucratic institutions to the pre-existing system. Of course, such structures persist because many individuals in African societies need them as their main or only source of income, and thus everybody is bound to accept them because, in theory, a whole community can benefit from the favours granted from a politician to an individual from the area. Because of this social acceptance, neopatrimonial politics have managed to permeate all political levels, affecting the distribution of resources and distorting development plans and diverting aid funds to ensure the survival of the system.

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Neopatrimonialism in Contemporary African Politics

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