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Evaluation of Chabal and Daloz's Africa Works, with Reference to Burkina Faso

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Critical Evaluation of Chabal and Daloz's Africa Works, with Reference to Burkina Faso

Chabal and Daloz's key point in *Africa Works* is that neopatrimonialism is central to African politics. The focus of their argument is that the political culture of Africa is inherently different to that of western states, and as such what the West sees as a system likely to fail, which is corrupt and mismanaged, is in fact working for African states, hence the title of Chabal and Daloz's book. While many academic point to neopatrimonialism as a threat to the African state,[1] in their view Africa does work through what they describe as the "instrumentalisation of disorder." [2] While some aspects of their argument do seem credible there are a number of critiques of *Africa Works*, foremost among which is that it overgeneralises suggesting that the many, if not all, states within Africa are the same. By looking at the case of Burkina Faso under two very different leaders, Thomas Sankara and Blaise Compaoré, this essay will show that Chabal and Daloz's theory cannot always be applied within one country, let alone throughout an entire continent.

Chabal and Daloz point to five features which they think are the key to any neopatrimonial society, and which can be seen in action throughout Africa. Each shall be looked at in turn and then the theory overall in the context of Burkina Faso under Sankara and Compaoré.

The first of these is the "notion of the individual" [3] which stresses the importance of the communal over the individual. The idea of being an individual citizen is a very western thought, in the case of Africa, Chabal and Daloz argue that decisions, actions, and political moves taken by those in power have to be considered as part of a communal psyche, due to the intrinsic linkages between the individual and their local community. Hence, there is arguably a blurring between the private and public spheres of life in which people are "nodal points of larger communal networks." [4]

Secondly, the "salience of reciprocity" [5] builds on the previous point, that relationships between individuals must also pay respect to the communal background of actors. Each party, and therefore communal network they represent, must expect something from the other, in any political deed it is understood that reciprocity determines its "symbolic and instrumental value...political acts are played out on the market place of the various patrimonial networks concerned." [6] In this context therefore political support is viewed as an exchange, votes or backing for goods or support for the communal.

The third feature is the "importance of vertical links" [7] which ties in with the previous points, if individuals are influenced strongly by communal ties, and reciprocity is central to African politics, then it follows that vertical links down through one's clan are key. In the case of Africa Chabal and Daloz take this to mean the distribution of state resources to one's own people which they call the "economy of affection" [8]. While this may be seen as corruption from a western perspective, Chabal and Daloz suggest that there is an acceptance of such practices in Africa as long as such activity is seen to serve more legitimate 'moral' purposes. [9]

Fourthly, the "conception of success" [10] which Chabal and Daloz claim is shown through consumption rather than production, meaning that instantaneous material gains are the favoured form of success. This has a negative effect

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on the development of the state as resources are syphoned off to give the impression of an affluent leader – which is seen to reflect well on the population – and to be distributed among those who gave their support to get the leader in power. State institutions are in this case merely a façade to be used as a patrimonial resource, rather than to conduct meaningful development. Western-style economic development is seen to be too arduous compared to the rapid gains to be had from reciprocity.[11]

Finally, the fifth feature is the “imperative of the short term view and micro-perspective”[12] which Chabal and Daloz argue is due to the African political systems incompatibility with the “hypothetical tomorrow.”[13] The system instead only looks at the present, and long term aims without immediate success are not seen as legitimate as they do not deliver to elites and through vertical links and networks of patronage to the communal.

While some of these features do in part fit into aspects of Burkina Faso, not all of them can be applied at once, if at all in some instances. The state previously known as Upper Volta under French rule was changed to Burkina Faso (literally meaning Land of the Upright People)[14] following the 1983 coup d'état which brought Thomas Sankara to power, this was one of a number of coups and changes in power in the state since independence was granted in 1958. Each successive coup brought an equally corrupt and militaristic regime to power, which did meet many of the features of neopatrimonialism espoused by Chabal and Daloz. The unstable government Sankara overthrew initially bought him in to “shore up credibility”[15] however he did the exact opposite, instead working with media as a whistleblower on the high levels of corruption and repression.

Clearly this view taken by Sankara does not fit with the fourth feature of neopatrimonial regimes stated by Chabal and Daloz. Further evidence of a misfit with their argument can be seen in the actions taken by Sankara on becoming Prime Minister, where upon he took a long-term view of politics. State institutions were not the façade implied by Chabal and Daloz, rather there was a concerted effort through governance to; improve infrastructure; encourage economic development; implement mass education programmes and public health reform; and support for women's rights. Furthermore, Sankara actively criticised the power and influence of traditional chiefs, and promoted an anti-imperialist and anti-aid agenda.[16]

There is no evidence that Sankara was abusing the state resources in order to further his political power and support only the community from which he came. Contrastingly, he seems to genuinely have wanted to help everybody in Burkina Faso, even if it meant limited short term success. It is clear that under the four year rule of Sankara significant political, social, and economic changes occurred.[17] The opposition to foreign aid in particular is striking, it implies the fourth feature in particular is incorrect in this case. By denouncing foreign aid as a way for former imperial powers to continue to have an influence over African states, and instead working for self-sufficiency for Burkina Faso, Sankara was obviously not looking to capitalise on state resources. The state did however continue to use foreign aid, although levels did not increase between 1983 and 1987 and the World Bank and France dropped Burkina Faso as a recipient of “general budgetary support” after Sankara came to power.[18]

Arguably, it was the lack of what Chabal and Daloz recognise as success in Africa which led to the assassination of Sankara, and subsequent coup by Blaise Compaoré, although it is still not clear who actually killed him. Sankara was not popular among the elites, who were not benefitting from the Marxist regime as they wished, among them Compaoré. Perhaps it was the perceived lack of legitimacy of the Sankara regime which led to his murder, clearly he was not performing in the context of clan representation, and accessing and distributing resources among them. In terms of the masses on the other hand, Sankara was very popular, undoubtedly because of his approach to legitimate government and trying to develop the state, especially in rural areas.

Sankara stated “woe to those who stifle their people,”[19] a phrase which throughout protests in the latter half of the rule of Compaoré has repeatedly been brought up as a symbol of popular discontent. While unfortunately many of Sankara's plans were not brought to fruition due to his assassination the eventual success or failure of them cannot be commented on. However, during his time as Prime Minister he showed time and again that projects once considered inconceivable in a country as poor as Burkina Faso could be set into motion. This was in part due to his ability to convince people that they could make a difference through speeches instilling positive messages in the abilities of the population, “that which man can imagine, he can achieve”[20]

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It is possibly this positive message and belief in the public that causes his name to be brought up time and again in Burkina Faso, most recently in October 2014^[21] during the civil unrest surrounding Blaise Compaoré's failed attempt to extend his presidential term limits.^[22] While the endeavours of Compaoré to maintain his position in power due to the benefits it gave him does suggest compatibility with the arguments of Chabal and Daloz other characteristics of his regime do not fit as closely. Ethnicity and patronage are still a feature of Burkinabe life, however while clearly they still exist, in only a small amount of the literature on the country, or on Compaoré is ethnicity a key aspect of the discussion. In an appraisal of the types of grievances raised in urban protest the crucial issues were urbanisation, limited employment opportunity, and economic hardship.^[23] While these can arguably be linked to neopatrimonial factors, compared to other African leaders Compaoré does not seem to have participated as fervently in clientelism and patronage as other African leaders.

Furthermore, contrary to the suggestion by Chabal and Daloz, there is an element of multiparty politics taking place in Burkina Faso, with nowhere the level of centralisation implied to be intrinsic to African politics in *Africa Works*, nor are the state institutions a mere façade. In fact there has been significant devolution of power in the country under Compaoré, especially in the northern regions, where institutions "are neither absent nor insignificant."^[24] Rather there exists a number of judicial and administrative bodies working alongside local chieftaincies. While these may not be the most efficient authorities due to the tendency for them to overlap and come to uneasy compromises, they never-the-less serve a purpose, and remove total control from Ouagadougou.^[25] Additionally, Compaoré did undertake some social improvement schemes of his own, considerable effort was put into rehabilitating inner city areas in response to the urban protest, although how far this can be considered to have been a stop-gap to placate protesters, and therefore tied to the fifth of Chabal and Daloz's features, in the short term is difficult to determine.

Admittedly, a major factor in the collapse of the Compaoré regime was allegations of corruption which do fit within the remit of Chabal and Daloz's third, and to some extent fourth features of African society. Furthermore, since the fall of Compaoré in October 2014 there are renewed tensions and crises over leadership in Burkina Faso. A number of individuals have claimed the leadership of the country, one appointed by Compaoré as the leader of an interim government to control while preparations are made for an election in a years' time, and two others, both military leaders.^[26] It is possible that Burkina Faso will regress back to a military dictatorship with the all trappings of Chabal and Daloz's neopatrimonial state.

In conclusion, the main critique made of Chabal and Daloz's *Africa Works* is that it overgeneralises Africa and assumes that one theory can be applied to the entire continent. Clearly the evidence shows that in the case of Burkina Faso their argument is not applicable to the one state across a period of time, and therefore cannot be considered a blanket theory to fit Africa as a whole. While individually some of the five features can be seen to work in the case of Burkina Faso on their own, more often than not they do not sit well as all together at any point. Finally, the state under Thomas Sankara was far removed from the features presented by Chabal and Daloz, and in its short duration incredibly successful, suggesting that Africa does not necessarily have to work as they argue, and there is in fact a better method that could be employed.

Notes

[1] Erdmann and Engel, "Neopatrimonialism Reconsidered", (2007), p97

[2] Chabal and Daloz, "The Instrumentalisation of Disorder" in *Readings in African Politics*, (2003), p51

[3] Ibid, p52

[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid

[6] Ibid

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[7] Ibid

[8] Ibid, p53

[9] Ibid

[10] Ibid

[11] Ibid

[12] Ibid

[13] Ibid, p54

[14] Harsch, Ernest. "The Legacies of Thomas Sankara" (2013), p363

[15] Ibid, p361

[16] Ibid

[17] Ibid

[18] Ibid, p364

[19] Sankara in Harsch (2013), p361

[20] Ibid, p371

[21] Smith, David, "Burkina Faso: violent clashes in over plans to extend president's rule" *The Guardian*, Friday 31 October 2014

[22] Although previously Compaoré had twice been successful in extending his term limits following the adoption of a new constitution restricting the presidency to two terms in the early 1990s. The fact remains that Burkina Faso is one of 30 African states to have adopted a two term limit, and one of only 7 where an amendment to the constitution was successful, highlighting another flaw in Chabal and Daloz's neopatrimonial argument. See Vencovsky "Presidential Term Limits in Africa" (2007)

[23] Harsch, Ernest, "Urban Protest in Burkina Faso", (2009), p278

[24] Lund, Christian. "A Question of Honour", p577

[25] Lund, p577

[26] Smith, David. "Power struggle in Burkina Faso after Blaise Compaoré resigns as president" *The Guardian*, Saturday 1 November 2014

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