DIAGNOSIS: UNDERLYING FACTORS PREVENTING PEACEFUL ALTERNATION TO POWER

Remarks by:
Ibrahim A Gambari (Prof)
Under Secretary-General
Special Adviser on Africa
United Nations

At

UNOWA / Wilton Park Round Table

On

Sovereignty and Transition in West Africa
Gorée Institute, Senegal
7 – 8 March 2005
1. Introduction

- Thank SRSG Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, Dr Williamson of Wilton Park and his colleagues for inviting me to participate in this Conference, whose theme is “Sovereignty and Transition in Africa”.
- Within that framework, my topic is DIAGNOSIS: Underlying Factors Preventing Peaceful Alternation to Power. I am requested to be brief.
- This is a particularly timely topic, especially in view of the most recent non-constitutional and non-transparent attempt to replace the late President Eyadéma with his son, Faure Gnassingbé Eyadéma in Togo.

2. The issue

I feel that a good starting point for addressing this topic is to refer to some previous work done on the subject which examines the impact and consequence of non-peaceful transfer of power in West Africa. They include conflicts, wars, political instability etc. These undermine socio-economic development including by discouraging domestic and foreign private investments. As the former Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali argued in his “Agenda for Peace” – there can be no development without peace. It is also true of course, that without sustainable development there can be no durable peace. Hence his “Agenda for Development”. He also argued in the last of the trilogy “An Agenda for Democratisation” that there would be neither peace nor development without democratization and respect for people’s human rights.

SG Kofi Anan continued the logic of these linkages with special reference to Africa in the 1998 landmark report “The causes of conflict and promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa”. His main point is reinforced by Professor Adebayo Adedeji when he argued that African conflicts are essentially crises of governance: they are violent responses to lack of democracy and freedom; politics of exclusion, mismanagement and tyrannical rule by some governments in the continent.

It is clear that given the experiences of coups, counter-coups, and other non-peaceful alternation of power in West Africa in particular (and elsewhere in the continent), priority number one for the region is to break the unfortunate cycle of violent change of government and reality thereafter of non-constitutional order. In this regard, while there are grounds for cautious hope (the alternation to power in Mali, the recent elections in Ghana, Niger and to some extent Nigeria); enormous challenges remain in building peaceful alternation to power and sustaining same in West Africa. Hence, we must address the root causes of the non-peaceful alternation to power in the sub-region. Of course, the task assigned to me by the organisers of this conference is a relatively easy one: Diagnosis of the problem. Nonetheless, it is my hope that the attempt at diagnosis will lead to the cure of the patient or at least a substantial alleviation of the creeping and debilitating disease. I propose, for our consideration, three broad categories of factors that undermine the emergence of a durable process of alternation to power, especially in Africa. 

First, poverty and under-development. This provides the environment for the manipulation of the political process in favour of perpetuating the status-quo. Access to power and maintaining such access assumes the proportion of “do or die” battles because success guaranteed control
over national resources in the large public sector for and on behalf of the ruling groups, their friends and families and their primary constituencies. Conversely, failure often leads to greater marginalisation, increasing discontentment which encouraged the losers in the political contest to resort to violent means to wrest power away from their opponents. Even where periodic elections are held, the political class deliberately manipulates the process, intimidates or “buys” votes and generally corrupts the electorate in an environment of endemic poverty. Having said this, we can have exceptions that prove the rule. Poor countries that experience peaceful alternation to power (such as Mali). The key to understanding such a situation is good governance in all its aspects. (I will return to this later.)

Second, the politics of exclusion which accompanies and reinforces excessive centralization and concentration of power. Lord Acton’s famous dictum: power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely, should be extended to take account of the corrupting influence of lack of respect for time-limits for those in power. All these breed resentment on the part of the competing elite for power which is a recipe for the use of violence to destabilise the regime which could take several forms: coup d’etat, insurrections, strikes, violent demonstrations etc.

Third, weak foundations for constitutionalism and the rule of law. There are four dimensions of this weak constitutionalism and commitment to the rule of law.

(a) historical and contemporary legacies including the inheritance of autocratic rule by the departed colonial masters; the adoption of one-party system of government and the imperatives of the Cold-War protagonists which favour stability over democracy and good governance.
(b) Prolonged military rule especially in countries such as Nigeria and Guinea which undermined the elements of democratic dispensation including checks and balances.
(c) Little or no commitment by the ruling elite and national leadership to constitutional rule of law.
(d) Absence of real and sustained checks and balances to the exercise of power. This is illustrated by the weaknesses of the legislature, judiciary, the lack of, or restricted, press freedom and embryonic civil society.
(e) The narrow base of constitution-making. Most constitutions adopted prior to or after independence, are the work of a few, by the few for the few. They are hardly subjected to nationwide referenda. Hence, there is no mass support for the constitutions which could constitute predictable and reliable deterrence to their violations or manipulations by the ruling elite.

Concluding remarks

There are no shortages of analyses of the African condition in general and the attempts at or successes in non-constitutional change of government in the continent. However, diagnosis alone will not suffice, what is needed are prescriptions which have real possibilities for bringing about sustainable change. Without pre-empting the other speakers who would be
addressing this dimension, I wish to end my presentation by giving a few pointers for their more detailed consideration:

(a) promotion of norms which de-legitimise non-peaceful and non-constitutional alternation to power,

(b) application of sanctions and other measures to discourage such unconstitutional alternation to power.

(c) Promotion of good governance in all its aspects; political, economic and corporate… In this regard, all African countries should be encouraged to join the African Peer Review Mechanism (APR). Currently 25 countries have joined the APRM.

(d) Decentralization of power and expansion of the private sector.

(e) Address the issue of poverty, and the mismanagement of natural and mineral resources. The combined efforts by NEPAD and African Union are showing the way by emphasizing African ownership and primary responsibility for addressing the continent’s peace and development challenges on the one hand and partnership under the international community to complement such efforts, on the other.

Thank you.