
When Fox Becomes Hedgehog: The Problem of Third World Leadership

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The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character ... The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.

—Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*

The old argument between sociologists and, for want of a better term, Carlylists, still rages on. Sociologists tell us there is no epoch or societal phase that can be better nailed to a leader's personality than to a larger trend in the society. The Victorian historian Thomas Carlyle, *per contra*, wrote that history is the biography of its leaders. It may well be that, at certain levels, the sociologists are right; that, for example, it is more *interesting* to trace the rise of Hitler—and the consequences of Hitler—to the desire of Weimar to find scapegoats for the outcome of World War I. It is, however, dazzlingly obtuse to look at the ensuing Second World War as unrelated to the peculiar features and defects of one person's personality structure.

In the same way, it is interesting to look at defects of state structure in Africa and at the unpreparedness of most of that continent for the independence thrust upon its constituent states 30 and 40 years ago. It is also interesting to

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think about whether these are strong states according to the distinction made by General Jose Almonte, the distinguished Filipino statesman, in a 1996 Fletcher lecture: Some states exist for effectiveness, for making a writ run, for mediating benefits and extending order. Others are merely authoritarian, and often totalitarian, states, whose thin veneer of governance serves primarily as a brutal collection mechanism for whoever is at that moment grasping the levers.¹

But it would still be obtuse to look at post-war Third-World history without dwelling on the appalling capacity for harm of its leadership. Chinua Achebe's observation sums it up: We cannot find anywhere—even, apparently, in Germany during the closing years of World War II—a gross national product that declined as precipitously as did Nigeria's during the 1993-1998 reign of Sani Abacha. We talk to our Nigerian friends, we recall our pleasant stays in that friendly country, we look at its influence on the world through its writers, its oil output, its particular history of civil war and forgiveness, innovative federalism, and so forth, and we cannot believe that things so brazen could happen at the close of the millennium. While Asian states expanded economically—or creatively worked themselves out of staggering financial crises—Sani Abacha actually put refineries out of operation through his control of the import of spare parts. As a result, he got gulps at both ends and hundreds of thousands of workers lost their jobs. This is a level of self-destruction rare in non-totalitarian modernity. It even raises the question of whether Nigerian governance is still modern. It is rare in the history of statecraft that something so wrongheaded happens. It cannot be explained by some sociological defect in Nigeria, except for the fact that there were no fail-safes of any kind to prevent such simply appalling abuses of power.

We can find the same pattern in Asia. Sociological trends are interesting and say something about tendencies and predispositions of polities, but we don't get very far without knowledge of the leaders. Politically, the Philippines have for a generation been a function of a brilliant and cunning manipulator; legacy of Ferdinand Marcos has continued to drive Filipino politics long after the dictator's 1986 demise. Indonesia's Suharto was able to pull all the reigns of governance into his hands and hold them for over 30 years. Trying to explain Indonesian politics and economics without such a figure at the center is like looking at Hamlet without the Prince. Malaysia surely will see its long Mahathir period as decisive in a number of ways—though luckily even this authoritarian strongman was unable to break the underlying British legacy of the common law, except selectively. Singapore can hardly be thought of without considering Harry Lee's formative rule. China's billion-person megaculture can finally zoom along without Mao—indeed it zooms because it is without Mao—but it must still pay lip service to the man who did about as much damage to a society as any man anywhere. Germany no longer honors Hitler, nor Russia Stalin. But China honors a man who made orderlies doctors and doctors janitors, and who no doubt directly caused scores of millions deaths through starvation, purge and fostering ruinous mass lunacy.

'THE FISH ROTS FROM THE HEAD' IN GHANA

In small Ghana, a daring and dramatic air force officer seized power in 1979, executed all the living heads of state, declared war on corruption and then as abruptly threw off the reigns of government only to take them up again two years later in response to manifest corruption. Throughout the 1980s, Flight Lieutenant Jerry Rawlings fought corruption and used his bully pulpit to put his state back on a virtuous economic track. Whatever else Rawlings was accused of, it wasn't corruption. At one point he sent a one-time intimate friend to the firing squad for dishonesty.

It looked like Ghana would recover. Aside from a year of pork-barrel election politics in which economic growth once again ground to a halt, the 1990s mostly witnessed solid economic growth. Sadly, the state had previously dropped so low in the status leagues that even three to five percent growth was not enough to return Ghana to the starting point of its pioneering 1957 independence. Nevertheless, things were moving in the right direction. But by 1998, and overwhelmingly by 1999, corruption had soaked back through the entire governmental fabric.

"The fish rots from the head," any Ghanaian taxi driver could and did tell the passenger, looking at the evidence of a once-again deteriorating society. Corruption had become omnipresently rank throughout the state, bringing with it a systemic and literal incapacity to pay its bills. Unlike a deadbeat individual, however, the state owns an army to keep creditors at bay.² The spillover effect was immediate. Students and faculty in this curiously zero-sum society fell to quarrelling over who should bear the burden of lost resources, and the universities were closed, and not for the first time. There had been much privatization, but friends of the holy entourage got the more promising companies, then did not pay up. Why should they have? They were part of the inner clique. Small wonder the government was going broke. Or was it paying for toys: Rawlings wanted a jet plane for his own use. He got one. It seems as if there was an over-invoicing in the process; somebody got an extra million dollars—or two.

Who will bell the cat—especially the cat who puts his enemies against the wall, then locks up anybody suspected of contemplating following his example to try to rid the state of tyranny. When treason doth prosper ... Westerners can hardly—half a century after Hitler and Stalin, anyway—imagine the kind of fear that such a man inspires. Lyndon Johnson and Bill Clinton raged at their staffs, for no good reason, but nobody feared the knock at 3 a.m. if she got into their bad graces.

What had happened? Rawlings, the lean and hungry zealot of reform, had become fat and spoiled by two decades of brutally arbitrary authority. He faced the overwhelming reality of his own commitment to step aside at the end of his constitutional term this year. This commitment was stressed by such figures as the

U.S. president and international lending agencies. Even Queen Elizabeth II—head of a Commonwealth taken more seriously in Africa than elsewhere—went out of her way to underline Rawlings' promise to step down. But the fox had become the hedgehog, and the hedgehog knew that he would be out of power, away from the luxury and safety of the castle, while still "needing" money, lots of it, to maintain his standard of living in safety. So he and his wife, Nana Konadu, began to plunder the state to ensure that their retirement was adequately—and safely—provided for. Or so it looked.³

There is no question that the whole society, to the extent that it was a polity connected through its modern sector, breathed and held its breath to the rhythm of this corpulent enigma's obscure whims. There was only one salient question in Ghana: Would Rawlings indeed step down in 2000? It was obvious that he would, but the fact that it was the dominant question for several years unhealthily betrayed the centrality of his personality—and personality defects—to Ghanaian politics. True, cocoa was still grown and exported, gold went up and down according to international demand and economists tried to describe a reality that excised Rawlings from consideration. But all of this occurred only in the most limited manner. There was no economic question in Ghana that was not, at the macro level, driven by this larger political reality. And the very appalling predicament in which Ghana found itself was anyway the product of several previous rulers who hollowed out the state in the pursuit of their primitive agendas.

The problem of bad leadership in the Third World has been seen in all too abstract terms. The problem is that the bad, usually violently arrived, guy on top legitimizes corruption and his entourage digs in, whereupon everybody else has a green light to get theirs. Indeed they must "get theirs," because the state will be impoverished by the greed of those on top, and the lesser folk must pad their own stocks.

The student of Third World politics has to reexamine just what the state adds up to. The modern sector is a thin one, especially in Africa. If the United States in 1996 found itself doing well without a government, or one surprisingly minimalist by the heroic assumptions of an earlier generation, that was because so much transpires on its own with or without an operating federal authority. In a traditional society, however, how much do things move along on their own dynamic apart from what "modern sector" leaders want in the capital? In such countries, there are very few channels through which government can direct its influence; that is one of the main facts of underdevelopment. These are weak states. Thus they are all the more easily dominated by unwise leaders who can seize every channel of government precisely because they are all so tender, so weak. Indeed, there are few examples of leaders getting all the channels and using them well. Vitality springs from appropriate conflict, not from enforced uniformity.

'IT'S ECONOMIC GROWTH, STUPID'

There are a few such successful leaders, however, and they are worth looking at. At one end of a spectrum is Thailand's Field Marshal Sarit Thannarat, who was perhaps lucky to have died in 1963 after just six years of supreme power, before being tempted into even worse financial shenanigans than fortune took him. As it was, the price of history was paid by his epigonic understudy, Thanom Kittikachorn, who ruled for another decade and then was swept away in 1973 by mobs of students (from universities greatly expanded by Thanom) and by a king who had only really regained the throne's luster through that regime's policies. What else is new—in politics, the greater the obligation, the more flagrant the ingratitude. The fact is that Sarit, whom no one would have dared transgress, ruled (by and large) fairly and presided over the most crucial stages of Thai modernization. It is to him and Thanom that substantial credit for the economic miracle must go.

It is true that Sarit's death left dozens of grieved and competing mistresses, the financial claims of whom revealed the enormity of his personal fortune. However, since it was accumulated and productively invested within Thailand, no one begrudges Sarit his \$150 million. Thanks to Sarit more than any other, Thailand has literally trillions of dollars of added value. Had Thailand grown at a more normal pace and experienced a GNP in the \$50 billion range during the 1990s, the country would have still been favorably compared to all societies in Africa and most in the Middle East and Latin America. Having reached the \$150-200 billion range, however, it was plainly adding a trillion dollars of wealth at least every decade.

What was different about Sarit? The same thing that is different about his successor, who is still alive. Talk to the 88-year-old Thanom about economic policy today, and he will name every key figure in his cabinets of the 1960s. These Thai leaders understood that what mattered was making it economically.⁴ "It's economic growth, stupid," could have been their motto. Sarit with every move and motion galvanized Thai society. He wanted to make it matter. He wanted the kingdom to be unheroically rich and decently healthy, equal to Western societies. It sounds so obvious, and yet it is almost unique in all the Third World. Name another leader who could make his writ run and who used his power, preponderantly, for the economic development of his society. It wasn't just that Sarit and Thanom were economics-oriented. They figured out the *right* policies a generation before most societies. True, Sarit did well while doing good: in the late 1950s, he accepted World Bank advice that corresponded to policies that put his political competition into exile. But it took guts, nevertheless, to give the Bank of Thailand its independence, on his surely correct assessment that political leaders would not

resist the temptation to loot the national bank if they could—or tilt policies to their private advantage. Thus, the Bank of Thailand became one of the hallmarks of virtuous economic policies. This remained true until the mid-1990s when it was briefly corrupted, bringing down with it the whole of Southeast Asia in the greatest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

At the other end of the spectrum we find successful leaders who are elected politicians. Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, accomplished the equivalent of Sarit and even more—and with more than a veneer of constitutionality, though he started with a more substantial economic base. The Tswana leadership in Botswana has done it. Musaveni, an economist, has taken Uganda into the high growth leagues, though the temptations of the arms trade have reportedly charmed him.

Believe it or not, the pursuit of economic development has minimal priority in most Third World power circles. It is that simple: Most Third World leaders don't get to the point of thinking about economic growth, about the advancement of their people. All too often, these goals are left to magic, not operational discourse. The leaders instead think about staying in power, or in the case of all too many, plundering the state during their ephemeral moment of dominance. Such was the game of Mobutu, Bokassa, Sani Abacha, the Sloc, Suharto, Marcos and far too many others. Students of these politics usually confuse themselves by assuming that the clichés of the development elites are driving barracks cliques and angrily assert that anyone suggesting otherwise is cynical. But let the facts speak for themselves.

CORRUPTION NEEDS A CIRCUIT BREAKER

Elsewhere, Nicholas Thompson and I categorized corruption at four levels.⁵ The first is just the petty dash commonplace in the Third World and American ports. The second is political subvention, legal or illegal contributions to politicians and parties designed to get rents or achieve policy purposes that are individually self-serving. The third is large-scale embezzlement from and by the state for personal purposes. This kind of corruption does not destroy the ends of the state, because it occurs outside the gates: virtuous policies drive the state, make it rich, indeed richer for theft purposes outside the gates. Finally, there is the Olympian totality (of the order practiced by Abacha and Marcos) in which the very ends of the state are subordinated, indeed molded, to the more than monarchical predations of a leader who no longer distinguishes between his aggrandizement and public objectives.

It seemed to us that the real problem really lies in this fourth category; the rest are tolerable for a good while.⁶ Thus, as long as Suharto was following virtuous economic policies and the state was getting richer, it didn't really matter—at

least not much economically—that he and his six children were stealing from the state. The economy was expanding at so rapid a rate that such graft was small change. However, after 1993, Suharto began to move competent professionals out and cronies in.⁷ The rot got worse as the decade wore on, and after the 1996 death of his wife, Madame Tien, there was no one to restrain the six children. The ends of the state became a family affair.

What seems to be called for is a new corruption circuit breaker. We are talking now about early warnings for genocide, and we have developed quite good early-warning methods for predicting famine. There are other such inter-concepts: For example, the requirement by the Congress that aid cease to countries spending above a certain level on defense, unless the president “determines” that such spending meets a public necessity. There could and should be international conventions for dealing with massive corruption that subverts the state it batters on. The international system has a right to so concern itself, because invariably those states will collapse and donor countries and organizations will have to go in to rescue the people whom the dictator’s policies have left starving.

How would this operate? There is no secret about which countries have the worst problems of corrupt leadership. Falling economic growth rates and cancelled elections are just a few of the indicators that could compose a formula for triggering a world quarantine of states whose leaders are hollowing out their states. IMF and World Bank lending would of course be the first trigger—and recall that both organizations continued lending vast sums to dictators like Marcos long after they knew well how obscenely he was skimming off the top. All donor governments would bind themselves to eliminate aid once a rational formula was devised. The United Nations would, at a certain point, have to pass action resolutions as well.⁸

It will be objected that such a program is unfair in not dealing with massive structural corruption in such huge countries as China. We are proposing here to deal with just one problem—and anyway, China has managed to enrich its people despite the scale of its corruption. The fact that we do not have a panacea for all Third World problems should not mean that we cannot deal with one of the two or three worst problems there. Too many people who have died, or seen their education cut off and worlds shrunk because of a greedy leader’s policies.⁹ Walk the streets of a Third World capital in tyrant hands. Look at the unemployed youths, the beggars, the crumbling universities and ministries. Then go to Singapore, where a leader declared war on corruption and the living standard is almost the world’s highest. Or Bangkok. Or Maputo, where a wise leader simply farmed out the customs service, thus closing down the biggest sinkhole in the economy, and guess what: Mozambique *led the world* in economic growth last year.

It is true that corruption has become one of the most fashionable topics of economics and politics lately; standards winked at only a few years ago are now

bringing down the mighty. Ask Helmut Kohl or James Soong. But most of the literature looks at standards in public service, at investment incentives, and so forth. It puts the cart *before* the horse. If we don't figure out how these guys—alas, it is mostly guys—have gone wrong, we're whistling in the wind. The kind of corruption that good public service commissions can reduce isn't the kind that destroys whole societies. The next time it becomes apparent that a leader of a friendly country has gone down the road of fourth-level corruption, we should be able to do something before he has bankrupted the state and glided into gilded exile. ■

NOTES

¹ See Wilfrido Villacorta and W. Scott Thompson, *The Philippine Road to NIChood: a Joint Project of De La Salle University and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy* (Manila, Philippines: De La Salle University and Social Weather Stations, 1996).

² See A.F. Mullins, Jr., *Born Arming: Development and Military Power in New States* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), for the argument that, at least, Africa's armies have indeed existed to plunder inward.

³ Safety was hardly a theoretical notion. Rawlings had executed all living former heads of state when he came to power, and the grievances of the surviving families were robust 21 years later. In a somewhat odd recent speech, Rawlings claims to have no regrets about the executions. The extent to which he dwelt on the issue suggests otherwise, as does his behavior.

⁴ Interviews conducted by the author in Bangkok in 1996 and 1997.

⁵ See Nicholas Thompson and W. Scott Thompson, *The Baobab and the Mango Tree: Second Chances for Ghana and Thailand* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).

⁶ Though Philippine Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo disagrees, arguing (in an interview with the author) that the petty corruption legitimizes higher corruption—and thus that the fight must be started at that level.

⁷ According to Smita Notosusanto, Ph.D. candidate at The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

⁸ Amidst all the reportage on tumult in Zimbabwe over the policies of President Mugabe, there has been little notice of how some of this was activated by multilateral donors' displeasure over the government's deceit on the question of military spending in the Congo War.

⁹ Thus, for example a Fletcher M.A.L.D. student rushed home to Zaire (as it then was called) to find his sick mother had died for lack of simple antibiotics.