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Title:

COLONIAL HISTORY AND THE SEARCH FOR DEMOCRATIC NATIONHOOD: THE CASE OF ANGLOPHONE WEST AFRICA

By

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Beginning with Nigeria in January 1966, all the four former British colonies in West Africa (Ghana, Sierra Leone and Gambia) fell under the barrel of the guns almost in quick succession. That entry of the military into politics and governance effectively terminated the nascent British democratic experiment of the Westminster variety in the West Africa sub-region. The centralising tendencies of decades of military rule subsequently produced strong and authoritarian presidential systems after the retreat of the military from centre stage. In many cases, the immediate post-military administrations were themselves later subverted by serial military interventions. These states remained under one form of authoritarian rule or the other until the ‘second wave of democracy’ which began in the 1990s brought back civilian rule.

But in spite of the apparent democratic ferment in the continent, these four Anglophone states have been engaged in what seems a futile search for enduring democracy. It seems that no matter how hard they tried, their democratic experiments are confronted by what has been termed the “inevitability of [their] instability.” The contention here is that the post-colonial instabilities that make democracy impossible in these states are deeply embedded in their very foundations. The defective foundations of statehood on which the states were erected have now come to haunt the post-colonial states, and have been making the sustained and enduring democratic rule a difficult task.

The basic thrust of the argument is that the British colonial political tutelage in these countries produced a core of nationalist elites who, severely excluded from the colonial political mainstream, received their training instead in anti-colonial and agitational politics. These same elites, as the inheritors of the mantle of authority from the departed British authorities, were inevitably saddled with having to operate democratic systems of rule for which they were not trained. Unfortunately they also had to operate with inherited civilian bureaucracies that were already accustomed to the dictatorial and overbearing style of the British overlords, and national armies created for the subjugation of the peoples to the will of the colonial states. It was

therefore no wonder that the new post-colonial 'democracies' wobbled along for only a few years before the inherent contradictions in their provenance overwhelmed them.

The paper will examine critically the colonial origins of these Anglophone states with a view to determining the very fundamental factors and foundational imperatives that have made sustainable and enduring democratic rule very difficult. We shall examine especially the contributions of the inherited state structures, civilian bureaucracies and the armed forces to the instabilities that have made democratic rule seem difficult. We believe that a deep understanding of these problems may help chart the way forward for enduring democracy in the sub-region.

The four Anglophone states have been selected for special study because of the similarity in their colonial provenance, common style of colonial administrations, existence of inter-territorial institutions linking the four of them, their similar post-independence political trajectories, and the kind of early post-colonial governments that were bequeathed to them.