

# The Arrogance of Power

It seems rather easy on paper. All that is needed is for someone to pick up a check and cash it. The check is worth \$5million and the added bonus is a \$200,000 for life. But there is a small matter. The person who picks up the check must be an African leader who was democratically elected and who was ready to demit office at the end of his or her constitutionally mandated term. The award was announced in 2007 and to date only three of Africa's 54 leaders have laid claims to it.

When Sudanese businessman Mo Ibrahim went before the world's press he was careful to state the requirements of the prize. According to Mr. Ibrahim, 'We made it clear from day one that the award is an award for excellence in leadership, for people who have no blood on their hands and no messy hanky-panky.' This idea has led to a governance index and this has established certain benchmarks. These are safety and the rule of law, human rights and participation in the government and economy, and human development.

Ibrahim's index has caught on in Africa and in 2015 it was reported that Mauritius was top of the list for good governance while Somalia was at the bottom. One of the old curses in Africa is the dictator for life. Power corrupts. It is addictive and once tasted it becomes difficult to relinquish. Elections are cosmetic while the rights of ordinary people are given lip service. In 2016 Yoweri Museveni of Uganda ran for his fifth term. This would give him 30 years in power. Museveni promised in 2001 that he would step down and that his job would be to choose his successor. But he changed his mind and amended the constitution to prolong his stay.

The long years in power have met with mixed reviews. Museveni was seen as a reformist and his government did much to fight the spread of AIDS. A growing economy and improvement in education led the US, under Bill Clinton, to describe Museveni as a reformer. But there have been problems with human rights that include the jailing of political rivals and journalists.

Equatorial Guinea is the case of a dictatorship that has gone wrong. President Teodoro Nguema

Mbasogo seized power in 1979 and has ruled his country with an iron fist. He 'won' 97 per cent of the votes in 2002 and Transparency International accused the leaders of, 'acquiring millions of dollars of real estate in Paris and on the French Riviera and buying luxury cars with embezzled public money.' Opposition to the government is non-existent and there are reports of torture and intimidation.

Equatorial Guinea has oil and gas reserves totaling billions and with a population under a million the standard of living should be high but most of the people live in poverty. In 2014, Teodoro Mangué, the son of the President was ordered to hand over \$30 million in assets to his country.

In Angola Jose Eduardo dos Santos has been ruling since 1979 and he shows no sign of giving up power. The country has oil reserves but this has not trickled down to the masses. The 27 years of civil war have left their mark. The life expectancy is around 55 years with infrastructure badly needed. There are allegations of rigged elections and social media has been blocked to prevent opposition. The president has been accused of staying in office too long. In 2013 his daughter Isabel was named by Forbes magazine as 'Africa's first billionaire.'

President Paul Biya of the Cameroon won a new seven-year term in 2011. He is currently in power for 34 years having ousted the former president Ahmadou Ahidjo in 1982. The government has been

accused of corruption, curtailment of press freedom, including a clamp-down on social media. Omar Hassan al-Bashir of the Sudan has been in power for over 25 years.

There are problems with South Sudan and continuing conflict in Darfur that has driven over two million persons from their homes. The loss of lives is estimated



**Nelson Mandela handed over power peacefully after one term.**

to be over 200,000 persons. Mr. Bashir faces two international arrest warrants that were issued by the International Criminal Court in The Hague. The charges are for genocide and crimes against humanity.

Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe has been in power for the last 36 years and he shows no sign of leaving. He is 92 years old and his name has been submitted for the next elections. A lavish birthday celebration was planned which prompted the local state newspaper to say, 'Mugabe's birthday is like that of Jesus Christ.'

Despite criticisms, the celebrations went on in great pomp. An official commented that to honor or one of 'Africa's finest icons in such a difficult time proves our resili-

ence.' A recent drought has left more than 3 million persons facing starvation. What will Mugabe's menu be? In 2015 it consisted of two elephants, two buffaloes, two sables, five impalas, and a lion, to the displeasure of the conservation movement. Mugabe will find much in common with Gambia's president Yahya Jammeh. President Jammeh said that he was prepared to rule Gambia 'for one billion years' and those who accused him of fraud 'could go to hell.' He took power in a coup in 1994.

The examples given have shown the unwillingness of leaders to hand over power. But there are



**Mugabe at age 92 refuses to hand over power after 36 years in office.**

also success stories in Africa. One of the most enduring and admirable took place in South Africa when Nelson Mandela handed over power after a term in office. The transition was smooth and Mandela remained a respected figure, an elder statesman of Africa and an example to democrats. Mandela told the world that he wanted a peaceful retirement. 'Don't call me, I'll call you,' he said upon leaving.

When President John Atta Mills of Ghana died suddenly in 2012 there was a smooth transition of power as Vice President John Mahama was sworn in to replace him. A transition also occurred in Malawi with Joyce Banda as president and Nigeria has had a new government with Muhammadu Buhari as president.

In 2015 the US Under-Secretary of State Linda Thomas-Greenfield said that, 'we are pleased that the Zambian elections were smooth, free, transparent and fair and a model for Africa.' Pierre Nkurunziza of Burundi and Rwandan President Paul Kagame would do well to heed the advice of President Ian Khama of Botswana and relinquish office. While Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo-Brazzaville fights to stay in power Tanzania's Jakaya Kikwete has left office after serving his two terms.

Clinging on to power isn't confined to Africa alone. The strongmen in Asia and Latin America have records that are hardly clean. Hugo Chavez and his successor Nicolas Maduro in Venezuela show the extent to which power corrupts. Fidel Castro ruled Cuba for 47 years during which human rights became a major issue. Evo Morales of Bolivia has tried unsuccessfully to fiddle with the constitution to extend his term and Daniel Ortega is said to be ruling Nicaragua like a fiefdom. Elsewhere, there

are problems of governance in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya and Egypt. In Asia, North Korea continues to pose a threat to the United States. Myanmar, on the other hand, has opened up itself to democracy after the recent elections.

President Obama and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon have warned leaders of the dangers of overstaying their time. The question is: why do leaders refuse to hand over power? Why are they reluctant to have periodic free and fair elections? One answer is the prestige and access that power brings. Who wants to give up power and all the perks that come with it? These include travel, the acquisition of property and living a lavish lifestyle. In some cases the nod of a leader may mean life or death for



**Dr. Dhanpaul Narine**

a protesting subject. There are cases in which leaders that are retired want to be the power behind the throne or they may even try to make a comeback.

Vladimir Putin was the President of Russia. He took a turn as Prime Minister and then returned as President. It is widely believed that he was the power behind President Dmitry Medvedev. Another argument for the continuation of power is that retiring heads of state do not come with a lot of benefits. According to Anneke Woudenberg from the Africa division at Human Rights Watch, 'very few African countries have any kind of pension scheme for former presidents. So out of power means out of money.'

This is only partly correct. Many leaders have amassed enormous wealth when in power so that they do not really need pensions. Phil Clark from London University states that weak opposition parties could open the way for dictatorships to take hold. But does he take account of the fact that the opposition parties could be weak because dictatorships repress basic freedoms? When the machinery of the State is used to muzzle dissent the opposition cannot thrive.

There is also international politics to consider. Western and other governments would do well to persuade entrenched leaders to create an open society and to encourage free and fair multi-party elections. There is no easy answer. Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka says that the spread of democracy hinges on an understanding of history and that leaders should not burden the future with their excesses.

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the THE WEST INDIAN.