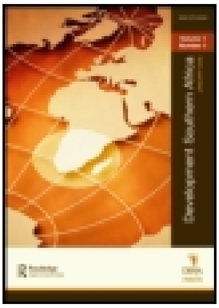

Development Southern Africa
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cdsa20

Ethnic bias, favouritism and development in Africa

Richard Ilorah [a]

[a] School of Economics and Management, University of Limpopo, South Africa

Version of record first published: 06 Nov 2009.

To cite this article: Richard Ilorah (2009): Ethnic bias, favouritism and development in Africa, Development Southern Africa, 26:5, 695-707

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03768350903303209

Development Southern Africa Vol. 26, No. 5, December 2009

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Ethnic bias, favouritism and development in Africa

Richard Ilorah

The leadership in many African countries, with their ethnic diversities, is characterised by ethnic bias and favouritism, and citizens are thus treated unequally in many respects, particularly when it comes to national resource allocation and political representation. This breeds resentment and creates conditions for an ultimate rejection of the state by the frustrated and politically conscious masses. It is also tantamount to corruption, weakening the ability of the state to function efficiently, and is therefore anti-developmental. This paper argues that the socio-economic crises in many African countries are aggravated by practices of ethnic bias and favouritism that have consistently violated the principle of the impersonality of economic agents, caused resentment among the marginalised ethnic groups, fuelled conflicts and retarded development on the continent. It is recommended that a strong and credible judicial body, with powers to investigate crimes against citizens and prosecute and punish offenders, be established by the African Union.

Keywords: *Ethnicity; ethnic bias; favouritism; human rights; corruption*

1. INTRODUCTION

Unequal treatment of citizens on the basis of ethnicity is a common characteristic of the political leadership in many African countries. This practice is anti-developmental (Martinussen, 1997:329–30), aggravates the problem of income inequality and leads to resource scrambles harmful to growth (Alesina & Rodrik, 1994), creating conditions for an ultimate rejection of the state by large numbers of frustrated and politically conscious people, especially those with considerable education (Todaro, 1994:159). It is also tantamount to corruption since it often involves explicit and implicit reciprocal obligations among the favoured groups, depending on whether the beneficiaries are business associates and acquaintances or friends and loved ones. It weakens the ability of the state to function efficiently and pursue growth-promoting policies (Mauro, 1995) because of lack of consensus on issues favourable to all ethnic groups (Easterly & Levine, 1997). Accountability to the general public is compromised since those in power often misuse public trust and the power entrusted to them for private gain (Rose-Ackerman, 1999:91). The lack of proper accountability, coupled with the sometimes passive response from intimidated and manipulated citizens – many of whom lack the willpower to speak out for fear of harassment – results in monopolisation of power, abuse of privileges, arrogance and waste of resources by the political leadership.

In Africa, it is not uncommon for authorities to award government contracts to unqualified bidders who are in cahoots with relatives and cronies. This often results in either poor execution of or non-execution of projects. Friends and relatives are prioritised in the granting of business permits and export and import business licences, which encourages rent-seeking behaviour. It is also not uncommon for the authorities to establish important government-funded projects in arbitrarily selected areas, even where the projects are cost-ineffective. Often, an atmosphere of uncertainty is created

Professor, School of Economics and Management, University of Limpopo, South Africa.

ISSN 0376-835X print/ISSN 1470-3637 online/09/050695-13
DOI: 10.1080/03768350903303209

in the domestic economy, encouraging capital flight and brain drain. This paper argues that treating citizens unequally on the basis of ethnicity is anti-developmental and a major problem in Africa. It has caused resentment among marginalised ethnic groups, fuelled conflicts and sometimes wars, and discouraged investments, retarding growth and development prospects.

The following section discusses theoretical issues that bring into focus certain anti-developmental aspects of personalised ties in general, and unequal treatment of citizens on the basis of ethnicity in particular. Section 3 looks at the effects of such anti-developmental attitudes and policies in some African countries, Section 4 makes a recommendation for tackling these problems, and Section 5 concludes.

2. ETHNIC BIAS AND DEVELOPMENT

Personalised ties seldom promote efficiency in the market. Dealing only with friends and loved ones limits market entry to insiders, causes sales and trading agents to favour relatives and friends, and compromises an important advantage of the market – its impersonality. Similarly, such ties in the public sector lead to a patrimonial system characterised by favouritism and payoffs that undermine the transparency and effectiveness of formal institutions (Rose-Ackerman, 1999:104–5). Formal agent–principal relations and the obligations they impose on agents become meaningless. The supposedly distinct responsibilities to a superior, considered to be separate from ties of loyalty, friendship and kinship, become difficult to accept as natural. Critics argue that the trust, reputation and reciprocal obligations created by personal ties can facilitate corruption, distorting the operation of the state (Rose-Ackerman, 1999:105). When formal state institutions are weak and ineffective, these personalised ties can be useful for a short period, but in time can promote a patrimonial system and lead to favouritism and corruption (Easter, 1996; Rose-Ackerman, 1999:107).

In a patrimonial state where a specific interest group is heavily dependent on state patronage, the ensuing corruption holds back economic growth (Kochanek, 1993), and development in general. Citizens in such a state may ignore the importance of the market and public-sector efficiency, and rather endorse the idea, albeit implicitly, that the only way to get anything done is to establish personal ties with those in power. They will also consider it appropriate to reciprocate with gifts to such powerful officials. Critics argue that such societies will find it difficult to develop large-scale business enterprises or support active cross-border trade, thus depriving themselves of sustainable economic independence, and will also find it difficult to establish modern bureaucracies where skills are the main prerequisites for hiring civil servants, and where civil servants are expected to keep their roles as officials distinct from their roles as friends or relatives (Rose-Ackerman, 1999:106).

Ethnic bias is a product of personalised ties between the leadership as public officials and certain interest groups within the same country, both usually from the same ethnic group. Just like personalised ties, therefore, ethnic bias has features of corruption and favouritism, and is anti-developmental. In societies that practise ethnic bias and favouritism, the behaviour of the leadership towards others varies depending on whether those others are from the in-group, with whom affinities are shared and who therefore should be treated fairly, or outsiders, including people from other ethnic groups, who must be politically and economically marginalised. The ‘minority at risk’ described by Gurr (1993) includes this latter group who, provoked by political and economic discrimination, often resort to political action in pursuance of collective interests. The fairly well-treated group usually comprises those to whom the leadership owes its power or on whom its continued power depends (Todaro, 1994:591). The leadership, backed by members of the same ethnic group, uses its political power to obstruct all economic reforms that could interfere with its control over the country's resources. Since the leaders depend on the state resources to maintain their power base, they resist any restructuring away from this dependency, including market liberalisation programmes that promote the free flow of resources to productive activities. They see economic reforms as barriers to important sources of self-enrichment, and so they intervene in all sectors of the economy rather than allowing market forces to fulfil their allocation role.

The leaders manipulate members of their ethnic group into believing that reforms are threats to both their political and economic power bases, and that they have a relatively prosperous community, so that reforms are more likely to reverse than increase that prosperity. They effectively promote wider division within the diverse ethnic groups, especially if members of the leaders' own ethnic group are themselves experiencing job competition from other ethnic groups (Martinussen, 1997:327). They manipulate laws and regulations too, violating individual rights, including the right to produce and make a profit. This situation puts each ethnic group at risk when it is out of power and, what is worse, makes it difficult to agree on good policies that foster economic growth (Easterly & Levine, 1997), especially long-term growth. Rather, the leaders waste resources on patronage and on corrupt and rent-seeking activities in order to hold on to power and the associated privileges (Brass, 1991). They systematically divert resources for investment to themselves and a few cronies from the same ethnic group, shifting the distribution of income in their favour at the expense of other ethnic groups.

Unequal income distribution is sometimes defended by being associated with a system of patronage aimed at creating a national bourgeoisie that can be transformed into a class of local investors and entrepreneurs (Akinde, 2004:11). This argument builds on the neoclassical view of the savings–growth causality, which argues that high savings will, through high investment, lead to growth. Theoretical support for this causal direction from savings to growth via investment comes from the Harrod–Domar model, which demonstrates that the more an economy is able to save and invest from a given Gross National Product, with total national savings being equal to total investment, the greater will be the growth rate of that Gross National Product (Todaro, 1994:70–2). In the tradition of the neoclassical pure market economy, broad income inequalities are seen as a necessary condition for maximum growth, which, in the long run, should raise standards of living for all, through the natural trickle-down processes of competitive and mixed economic systems. This argument is also reflected in the controversial Kuznets curve, which promotes the hypothesis that income inequality first increases and then decreases with development (Kuznets, 1966). Critics of this common view, however, argue that its validity would, to a large extent, depend on how the savings are invested. As is the case in countries practising ethnic bias and favouritism, the ruling elites (the leadership) and their relatives and cronies usually belong to the same ethnic group and are not noted for their frugality or their desire to save and invest substantial proportions of their income in the local economy (Todaro, 1994:159). Savings by the privileged few in such countries are anti-developmental because they are often stored in safe havens abroad in the form of capital flight (Todaro, 1994) for fear of political instability at home, usually a product of ethnic bias and favouritism. Such savings aggravate the wealth and income inequality that are considered harmful to growth

(Alesina & Rodrik, 1994) and impose a tax burden on human and physical capital investments and other growth-promoting activities (Persson & Tabellini, 1994).

3. THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

The root causes of ethnic bias and favouritism in Africa can be traced back to colonial days. Colonisation redrew the boundaries of African nation-states that were more or less disproportionate amalgams for easy administration (Kumuyi, 2007). These states were modelled as extractive rather than investment destinations; the colonial powers being engaged in predatory activities regardless of the indigenous peoples' religious beliefs, cultures and ethnicity (Grabowski, 2006). The arbitrarily redrawn boundaries defied any genuine process of development, especially political development, and rather created fertile ground for conflict. The amalgamation of a wide variety of ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic groups within the same nation in practice created fault lines that divided societies (Grabowski, 2006). However, the exercise provided opportunities for the colonialists to play one ethnic group against another to maintain a strong grip on power.

Since the independence of new nation-states, Africans have simply continued with the same politics of extraction and divide-and-rule rather than with good investment and the unification of diverse ethnic groups. The political leadership has remained a business of narrow ethnic and group interests, serving only special interests and focus groups. It has thus far failed to address the legacies of the colonial administration in any thorough fashion, with the result that harmonious ethnic co-existence remains elusive on the continent. The political leadership has, to a greater or lesser degree, complacently continued with the colonial leadership style, practically from the moment of independence, which explains why the power of certain ethnic groups has been perpetuated – in other words, why many African leaders, allied with citizens from their own ethnic group, consider it a worthwhile national ideal to monopolise disproportionate shares of their countries' resources. Critics argue that the continent lacks a unifying servant-leadership with a strong motivation and deep desire to serve all citizens without special political favours or prejudice to any group on the basis of ethnicity (Kumuyi, 2007).

In many African countries, political favours, whether in cash or in kind, inspired by ethnic bias and favouritism are to some degree altruistic transfers with no explicit reciprocal obligations attached. The benefactors do, however, derive psychological benefits – described by Rose-Ackerman as 'the satisfaction of living up to a moral commitment [though receiving] no tangible gains' (1999:93). Often, these benefactors favour certain ethnic groups and disfavour the others. In some countries, the disfavoured groups exhibit frustration but nevertheless tolerance and submissiveness too—partly because they lack the willpower to complain and partly because they fear even more severe exclusion, reinforced by intimidation, reprisals or harassment should they complain. Tanzania is an example where, despite widespread corruption inspired by ethnic bias and favouritism, the victims—predominantly Indian, harassed and intimidated by powerful political groups—usually become resigned to their fate for fear of reprisals. The number of those living below the poverty line in the country rose from 48.5 per cent in 1991 to 75 per cent in 2000 (Lipumba, 2003:12–15).

In some African countries, however, these victims of ethnic bias and favouritism have been transformed from passive non-beneficiaries to active political adversaries and have threatened political stability and the governments concerned through rebellion and conflicts. The political climates of Sudan and Uganda in recent decades offer good examples. In Sudan, the dominance of the country's natural resources by a government led by the Arab Muslim North, coupled with religious intolerance and poor integration of its largely Christian and animist African southerners, culminated in armed struggles that have only now subsided after more than 21 years. Even the calamitous crisis in the country's Darfur region that has claimed many lives and destroyed economic activities stems from the exclusion and marginalisation from political processes and economic development of large ethnic groups who demand local autonomy, better representation at national level, and an end to ethnic discrimination. In Uganda, President Yoweri Museveni heads a regime that is more like a military government than a civilian one and is rife with ethnic conflicts, the main victims being people from northern Uganda and the Acholi ethnic group, both condemned as primitive and therefore marginalised through displacements (Finnstrom, 2005:9–11). The ethnic-inspired conflict that began in the country in 1986 between the government and a rebel group, the Lord's Resistance Army, has yet to be resolved.

Many countries in Africa experiencing the 'minority at risk' syndrome described in Gurr (1993) have also seen the formation of various levels of militant ethnic groups, a syndrome described by Brass (1991). These levels, usually evolving sequentially, are *ethnic transformation*, *ethnic community* and *ethnic nationality*. Rwanda, Burundi and, to some extent, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have witnessed ethnic transformation in the form of collective action by ethnic groups against one another and even against the state. In Rwanda, for example, the ethnic tensions between the majority Hutu group and minority Tutsis peaked in 1994 when, within the space of 100 days from April to July, about 800 000 lives were lost, most of the victims being Tutsis and some Hutus who opposed the Hutu-led government's repressive policies (Harsch, 2004:14). In Burundi, a similar conflict between Hutu and Tutsi groups resulted in a war that lasted for 12 years from 1993, claiming about 300 000 lives (Wakabi, 2005:26–7). In Nigeria, ethnic groups have to some extent developed into an ethnic community, the main affected area being the oil-rich delta, especially Ogoniland, which has already organised into such a community. The people of Ogoniland complain bitterly of political and economic marginalisation by the Nigerian Government despite their ancestral land being the main source of the country's oil and thus of government revenue. The collective action by the Igbo, who are the predominant ethnic group in the country's eastern region, would have evolved into ethnic nationality, under the name of Biafra, if it had not been for the defeat of the secessionists by the federal government in a three-year civil war from 1967 to 1970, with many lives and properties lost. This civil war was also caused in part by marginalisation and exclusion.

Nigeria's ethnic fragmentation and religious intolerance make it difficult to establish a stable government. The very strong ethno-religious character of the country's politics influences most of the central government's development strategies. This has continued to create tension in the country, exacerbated by the fact that the influential Hausa-Fulani ethnic group, which has held political power for much longer than any other, sees itself as a 'superpower' in the country and therefore believes that the country's unity depends on maintaining the *status quo*. The other ethnic groups, including the Igbo, the Yoruba and the minorities, contend that the existing institutional structures in the country continue to deny them real political power. This lack of proper national unity has meant that, rather than agreeing on policies that foster economic growth and development, all of the ethnic groups continue to focus mainly on grabbing the spoils from the oil, the country's main source of revenue, perceived to have been dominated so far by the Hausa-Fulani. The struggle for access to oil revenue remains an important driver of the struggle for power in the country, with politicians promoting further ethnic divides for personal gain. An example is the splitting of the country's original four federal regions, East, West, North and Mid-West (Sheyin, 2007:32), into 36 states from the 1960s through the 1980s – a project that not only further weakened the already battered national cohesion and chances for unity, but also encouraged the waste of resources through the creation of a bloated public sector. The project means that more oil revenue is allocated to those regions that have been awarded more states.

The struggle for the country's oil resources has also meant increased government intervention in private-sector activities. For example, in the 1980s some members of the ruling elite, comprising top-ranking military officers, their spouses and cronies from mainly the same ethnic group, hoarded large quantities of oil, creating artificial scarcities that resulted in very high domestic prices, and shared the profits with their recruited smuggling syndicates (World Bank, 1993). Earlier, at the start of the 1970s, the country's cement manufacturers were tasked with supplying cement at prices heavily subsidised by the government to high-ranking military officers, the majority belonging to the ruling ethnic group. This made competition difficult, especially for those without government connections. Shortly afterwards, in 1975, when the cement producers' losses had become unbearable and the local market could no longer get its regular domestic supplies, the same officials in the military government began importing large consignments of cement. It was later revealed that the consignments were even deliberately delayed at their port of entry in Lagos, with the freighters compensated for having to wait, and that the whole exercise was aimed at reaping higher benefits by aggravating scarcities and pushing prices high for local consumers. These types of interventions in the market by the Nigerian political leadership, albeit in military uniform, were said to have cost the country an estimated US$2 billion, or one-quarter of the 1975 oil revenues (Lundahl, 1997:40).

Meanwhile, the government had banned all importation of stockfish for no apparent economic or health reason other than to punish the Igbo, who had just been defeated in a civil war and for whom trade in stockfish was an important mainstay at the time. The ban resulted in smuggling instead, the beneficiaries being government officials and their recruited smuggling syndicates, while importers and consumers alike suffered. Incidents of capital flight from the country have also been noted, among the most pronounced in recent years being the estimated $6 billion stolen by a previous military dictator, Sani Abacha (*City Press*, 2005), who hails from the dominant ruling ethnic group. Perhaps the Nigerian Government's most serious cost-ineffective and therefore growth-retarding project, inspired by ethnic bias and favouritism, was the construction of the country's largest oil refinery in Kaduna in northern Nigeria. This project was merely a demonstration of power by the ruling northern elite at the time. It has since proved difficult to sustain, partly because of lack of expertise in maintenance and partly because of the enormous costs involved in transporting the crude oil through often sabotaged pipelines from the producing delta area in southern Nigeria.

Ethnic bias and favouritism have aggravated the fragmentation of Africa's diverse ethnic groups and have been linked to the continent's poor economic performance. African countries lack the ethnic homogeneity associated with productivity and capital per worker increases (Easterly & Levine, 1997). Workers belonging to the 'wrong' ethnic group, and therefore without proper political representation, lack motivation at work because they feel alienated by the system, and those with proper political representation, by virtue of their belonging to the ruling ('right') ethnic group, exude enormous arrogance and are overprotected by the system. Workers in this latter group, most of whom hold high positions, hardly possess the necessary competence but nevertheless keep their jobs, especially since they face little competition from their peers. Africa loses in the process. Critics argue that ethnic fragmentation aggravated by ethnic bias and favouritism continues to burden the political systems in many African countries and has a negative effect on economic and social development. For example, in the Ivory Coast the term *Ivoirité* is the country's version of modern nationalism, defining the criteria for participation in political life and the distribution of resources, including jobs, property and political power (Akinde, 2004:26). These criteria put certain ethnic groups at a disadvantage, especially those of suspected foreign descent, blocking them from mainstream economic and political activities (Akinde, 2004). *Ivoirité* nationalism has been criticised for being anti-developmental and for trying to keep the Akan, the ethnic group that has ruled the country since independence, permanently in power.

In Ghana, ethnic-inspired rivalry is mainly between the Ashanti group, which produces most of the country's primary export, cocoa, and is therefore seen as having economic and industrial power, and the Akan group, which has the most political power by virtue of its several members from the educated elite, including the country's founding father, Kwame Nkrumah. During its term of office from 1957 to 1966, Nkrumah's Akan-led government taxed cocoa producers heavily through a Cocoa Marketing Board, virtually freezing the producer price of cocoa in the process (Easterly & Levine, 1997). This heavy tax burden on cocoa producers was only lightened when an Ashanti-based government, with Kofi Busia at the helm, ruled Ghana from 1969 to 1971. Busia's government tried to restore incentives for cocoa producers by increasing producer prices, paying farmers close to world-market-determined prices for their crops. The government also devalued the overvalued local currency, boosting cocoa exports (Easterly & Levine, 1997). Busia's efforts to promote cocoa production were reversed when he was ousted from power by the military in 1971. The military leadership partially reversed the currency devaluation, favouring the political elite and their ethnic supporters who were engaged in the importation of foreign goods (Easterly & Levine, 1997). At the same time, the contribution of cocoa production to farmers' income as well as the national income decreased drastically. For example, the ratio of the producer price to the world market price of cocoa decreased from 89 per cent in 1949 to just 6 per cent in 1983, and the contribution of cocoa exports to the Gross Domestic Product decreased from 19 per cent in 1955 to 3 per cent in 1983 (Easterly & Levine, 1997). The overvalued exchange rate in Ghana was also reflected in a high black market premium that peaked in 1982, 'with the black market exchange rate at 22 times the official exchange rate', and the effect of this on cocoa and the economy was described as 'killing the goose that laid the golden egg' (Easterly & Levine, 1997:1218). Even the ascension to power of President John Kufour, an Ashanti, in recent times has not significantly lessened the ethnic hostility in the country, since it is seen by many Ghanaians as heralding the hegemony of the Ashanti ethnic group that already dominates other ethnic groups in the matters of economic and industrial power. It therefore fills other ethnic groups with envy and hostility.

In Kenya, the citizens are divided mainly along ethnic lines, these divisions often posing threats to the country's stability and development. Ethnic loyalty has grown so strong in the country that it is considered a threat to nationhood. A recent example is the

2007 post-election violence that was mainly fuelled by ethnic hatred, claiming an estimated 1000 lives and displacing 350 000 people (Kimani, 2008:3). The violence broke out on 30 December 2007, barely three days after the disputed 27 December presidential elections, in which the incumbent, Mwai Kibaki, had declared himself the winner over the main opposition, Raila Odinga; these two aspirants being from different ethnic groups. Kibaki's victory declaration had defied objections by the opposition and election observers that the vote tally was seriously flawed (Kimani, 2008). By the time a power-sharing agreement was signed, aimed at resolving the crisis, the country had suffered an enormous loss of homes, property and livelihoods, in addition to the loss of lives. For example, the country's manufacturing association noted that industry lost an estimated 35 per cent of its business in January 2008 alone and anticipated a 20 per cent decline in production by April of the same year (Kimani, 2008:18). The impact of the post-election violence has been particularly significant in the sub-region, in view of Kenya's long-standing role as East Africa's main transportation hub. Over 80 per cent of neighbouring Uganda's imports and almost all of Rwanda's exports pass through the Kenyan port of Mombasa. Other countries in the sub-region, such as Burundi, the eastern DRC, parts of northern Tanzania and southern Sudan, also depend to a large extent on this port for their commercial trade (Kimani, 2008:3).

Ethnic hatred and the struggle for power in Kenya are interwoven, often stirred by the feeling of 'winner takes all'. In other words, it is believed that any ethnic group with access to political power also commands economic power in the country. Ethnocentrism in the country's politics, in particular, has meant a corrupt and incompetent administration, with many civil servants appointed and promoted to positions on ethnic grounds rather than on merit. Kenya has a complicated mix of several ethnic groups, the dominant ones being Kikuyu, Luhya, Luo, Kalenjin and Kamba. These comprise about 69 per cent of the total (Easterly & Levine, 1997). Under President Jomo Kenyatta, the Kikuyu formed an alliance with the Luo and later with the Kamba, and were the dominant power from the country's independence in 1963 until 1978. Kenyatta prioritised his coalition home region during national expenditure allocations. For example, his coalition's road-building investment share totalled about 44 per cent in 1979/80 (Easterly & Levine, 1997). The ascension to power in 1978 of President Arap Moi, a Kalejin, in alliance with Kamba, Luhya and smaller groups, resulted in a reversal of the road-investment shares. Moi's coalition home region increased its share from 32 per cent in 1979/80 to 57 per cent in 1987/88, while Kenyatta's share fell to 16 per cent. Expenditures on health were also revisited in favour of Moi's coalition home region, with a share of 49 per cent against Kenyatta's share of just 18 per cent during 1987/88 (Easterly & Levine, 1997). Political influence among Kenya's ethnic-minded ruling elites also extends to controlling the country's commercial banks, which often engage in high-risk lending even to borrowers with no intention of honouring repayment obligations (Rose-Ackerman, 1999:10). It was estimated that in 1992 about one-third of the country's banking assets were more or less worthless, with political interference in the financial system to blame (Bigsten & Moene, 1996; Rose-Ackerman, 1999:10–11). Often, critics are silenced by patronage and rewards (Rose-Ackerman, 1999:213), which diverts scarce resources and entrepreneurial talents away from productive investments.

In the DRC (formerly Zaire), President Mobutu Sese Seko, who ruled the country from 1965 until 1997 and changed its name from Congo to Zaire, suppressed all opposition, placing mainly people from his ethnic group in all strategic and important positions and using his country's enormous mineral wealth to sustain his corrupt regime

(MacGaffey, 1991). While Mobutu looted the national treasury, depleting it of foreign exchange reserves, a great deal of the country's mineral output was, with the complicity of customs officials, smuggled out by members of Mobutu's inner circle and ethnic group. The country's importers, with the complicity of bribed government officials, undervalued their merchandise significantly, depriving the national treasury of revenue from import duties (MacGaffey, 1991). The country gradually but consistently degenerated to a dysfunctional state with predatory and corrupt officials at all levels of government. Mobutu was eventually overthrown by another dictator, Laurent Kabila, who immediately replaced Mobutu's people in important positions with his own people. Kabila also stepped up expenditure and resource abuse Mobutu-style, renamed Zaire the DRC and, to safeguard his power base, took total control of the country's natural resources and awarded worthless contracts to neighbouring Zimbabwe, Angola and Namibia – three countries that were also used as fronts to fence off an aggressive invading Rwanda. Kabila's government intervened specifically in the market for diamonds, one of the country's main mineral resources, ordering dealers to sell their gems to a state-backed monopoly, an unnecessary intervention that adversely affected the country's largest source of export revenue (*The Economist*, 2005). Kabila was assassinated and succeeded by his son, Joseph Kabila, but lasting peace has yet to prevail in the DRC, even after the recently held democratic elections that officially endorsed the young Kabila as president. The successive regimes in the DRC have thus far made little or no positive impact on the country's economic development. Their expenditure patterns remain an expression of power by the ethnic groups in power and actually undermine the legitimacy of these regimes.

Ethnic problems in Africa, inspired by ethnic bias and favouritism, have meant that resources for development are often diverted to finance conflicts. Between 1970 and 2002, over 35 wars were fought in Africa—with the vast majority of them intrastate in origin. In 1996 alone, armed conflicts in 14 of the 53 countries of the continent produced more than 8 million refugees and displaced persons. Over a 5-year period to 1997, armed conflicts claimed about 2 million lives; and by 2000 there were about 12 million refugees in Africa, over 40 per cent of the world total (African Development Bank, 2003:39). The annual average increase in expenditure on defence for all the sub-Saharan countries, based on the 1980 level, rose from 24.1 per cent during 1975–1984 to 88.4 per cent during 1985–1989 (World Bank, 2002:204). In 2000 (the last year for which data are available), the value was still very high at 81.3 per cent. Productive investment, on the other hand, has remained very low in the continent. For example, Africa's share of world total foreign direct investment in 1970 was a mere 5.5 per cent, and during 1990–2000 it fell to 1 per cent (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development/African Development Bank, 2002). The level of investment on the continent has remained dismally low even in recent years, recording a 15 per cent decrease affecting both exports and imports, and the continent's world exports share declined from 7.3 per cent in 1948 to 1.5 per cent in 2001, and that of sub-Saharan Africa to 1.3 per cent (African Development Bank, 2004:146–7). The situation remained appalling in 2004, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, whose share of global trade remained low at 1.5 per cent (World Bank, 2006:312). Africa's performance has clearly deteriorated over the years. Many sub-Saharan African countries obtained their political independence as from the 1960s. This brought with it power struggles among the diverse ethnic groups. The lack of power sharing in particular caused resentment among the under-represented ethnic groups, who felt politically marginalised. This has fuelled ethnic conflicts, which have had a negative effect on socio-economic conditions in many countries (African Development Bank, 2004:146).

4. RECOMMENDATION

A country strategy aimed at achieving equal participation by all ethnic groups would ordinarily demand a political leadership of the servant-leader type that is accountable to all citizens. Discrimination against citizens on ethnic grounds is a violation of human rights. Ethnic groups that are discriminated against in Africa are usually marginalised economically in terms of resource allocation and politically in terms of decision-making. Addressing these problems in view of the lack of dedicated servant-leadership in many countries therefore requires that the continental body, the African Union, set up a strong and credible African court on human rights, with a broad but well-defined mandate that includes, among other things, effective protection of marginalised ethnic groups. Such a court should be accorded a reasonable amount of autonomy, and be adequately resourced and given powers to investigate crimes against citizens and prosecute and punish offenders, irrespective of their political or economic standing. Many African countries have poor human rights records, a legacy of the colonial administrations that, in their quest to extract as much of the resources as possible, denied the colonies their human and civil rights. Africa's human rights record has failed to improve with the transition of power to Africans, and abuses even escalated, especially during the Cold War period when many African countries were governed by authoritarian, often military, dictators, who forced their opponents into exile, or jailed or killed them (Ilorah, 2004). The human rights abuses also meant that ethnic bias and favouritism increased. According to Bottigliero, most African countries have yet to see human rights as 'part of an integral strategy to prevent ethnic violence and promote the rule of law in society' (2007:156).

The regional and sub-regional organisations in the continent have so far prioritised peacekeeping and peace enforcement operations but given far less attention to human rights issues, such as the ethnic bias and favouritism that lead to violence and, by extension, hold up development in the region. Africans have, in other words, adopted the strategy of 'cure is better than prevention' when it should be the other way around. The existing African Court on Human Rights, operational since 2004, and some other parallel operating instruments and institutions—such as the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, operational since 1986 (Bottigliero, 2007:156), and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, a quasi-judicial regional human rights institution, established in 1987 (Fleshman, 2004:10)—all have limited mandates – a shortcoming that limits their dealings with ethnic minority issues on the continent (Bottigliero, 2007:157). For example, the African Commission was mandated to deal mainly with interstate complaints from governments, and not necessarily with complaints from individuals or groups of individuals except in rare cases, many of which have usually been ruled inadmissible for the simple reason that the commission lacks proper investigative powers and resources. The commission also needs the prior authorisation of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government to take any action against offenders (Bottigliero, 2007:157–8). Even the existing African court has similar constraints. Not only must the court be granted jurisdiction by governments over private cases, it has to be established that the complainant has exhausted all local remedies, a task that proves rather cumbersome. Critics argue that many African judges, afraid of losing their positions, or being arrested or assaulted, are simply incapacitated to pass judgements against their own governments or influential personalities (Fleshman, 2004:10). Since they are not insulated from political pressure, their ability to carry out their judicial duties is severely limited. Perhaps these constraints explain the African Commission's powerlessness to prevent the ongoing ethnic-inspired humanitarian crisis in Darfur and the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, and equally its inability to provide victims with effective redress. These weaknesses of the existing commission and court justify the urgent need for a much stronger, independent and more credible African court on human rights. The African Union should do more to assist in this regard.

An important concern for the African Union is how it can contribute to holding African leaders accountable to their people. It wants to determine measures for setting up standards of economic and political governance by which the performance of African governments can be objectively assessed. An arm of the African Union, the Peer Review Mechanism, is already tasked to periodically do an objective assessment of member countries' government performance, to identify and promote appropriate services, and to raise an awareness alarm where countries lack the required standards (Ilorah, 2004). This task should be seen as a practical demonstration that the African Union has replaced the Charter of its predecessor, the old Organisation of African Unity – a charter that subscribed to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of its neighbours (a stipulation that often stifled criticism of fellow African leaders) – with a more progressive provision establishing a principle of non-indifference (African Union/New Partnership for Africa's Development, 2001:5), especially in areas including unconstitutional seizures of power, genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity (Ilorah, 2004). However, special emphasis on ethnic bias and favouritism, the main factors causing conflict on the continent, is still lacking. A strong, independent and credible African court on human rights is therefore needed to address these issues, especially since many countries on the continent lack powerful independent judiciaries. Perhaps the court should also undertake other functions such as education and advocacy, teaching citizens about their human and civil rights and their civic duties and obligations. The African Union for its part should unreservedly encourage political power sharing among ethnic groups in all member countries. It should discourage undemocratic direct father-to-son power transfers or any similar power transfers as these tend to perpetuate ethnic dominance, promote corruption and discourage proper reforms and investments, thus retarding growth and development prospects.

5. CONCLUSION

Africa has failed dismally to benefit from its ethnic diversity because of ethnic bias and favouritism. In many countries on the continent, these remain the main cause of conflict and under-development. The continent lacks dedicated leadership and strong democratic institutions, with the result that the character of governments has remained more or less unchanged, lacking in all-inclusive reforms that favour all citizens, irrespective of their ethnicity. The hegemonic elites in power in many countries continue to rule rather than govern, looking mainly after the interests of their own ethnic group on whom their power mostly depends. We suggest that the African Union set up a strong, independent and credible African court on human rights with a broad but well-defined mandate that includes effective protection of marginalised ethnic groups.

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