Africa's 40 years of misery

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NINE French-speaking countries in Sub- Saharan Africa completed 40 years of independence from France and Belgium last month, but regional analysts say there was nothing to celebrate because the socio-economic situation in these territories has worsened since independence.

The process of independence started in French-speaking countries in 1958, when Guinea Conakry chose to declare independence. Two years later, between January and November 1960, France granted independence to the majority of its colonies in West and central Africa.

Belgium followed suit by granting autonomy to the Belgian Congo (currently Democratic Republic of Congo), Rwanda and Burundi in the same year.

Last month 40 years ago the peoples of Togo, Benin, Ivory Coast, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Congo Brazzaville, Gabon and Senegal took control of their own destinies. For a long time many French-speaking Africans believed that independence would mark the end of the suffering, misery and humiliation they endured during more than a century of European domination. But the reality turned out to be very different.

"Since independence, the same problems - corruption, nepotism, absenteeism - we face the same problems. Basically nothing has changed," said Father Raymond Goudjo of the Catholic Church of Benin.

Today, the societies of these former French and Belgian colonies have been eroded by absolute poverty, epidemics, HIV/AIDS, civil wars, genocide, refugees, and famine. The majority of these countries are classified among the poorest in the world.

Edem Kodjo, the former Secretary-General of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), attributes the catastrophic situation of these countries to incompetence and mismanagement by their African leaders, which has bred timidity in ordinary Africans.

In fact, the colonisation produced politicians who could neither develop the economy of their countries nor ensure the well-being of their people. The most obvious example comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Congo, a former Belgian colony, had considerable economic assets when it became independent in June 1960: roads and railroads in good condition, one of the few airlines on the continent, an industrial base and a stable currency.

Forty years later, the DRC is in dire straits. A bloody and costly war has brought the country to its knees. Some analysts believe this is the result of politicians' selfishness. "There have been a lot of opportunists," said Kitima Kasendwe, himself a politician. "They confiscated the power from the people and put in place a predatory mode of management of the national resources. This led to embezzlement of the state's money and goods. But the authors were never punished."

The analysis also stands for neighbouring oil-rich Congo Brazzaville, where the people link 40 years of independence to 40 years of misery. "If one looks at the period between 1960 and 2000, one can say that except for rare moments of improvement in the eighties, our economy did not experience major periods of prosperity," said Ludovic Mpouto, a lecturer at the University of Brazzaville.

Like so many African countries, the Congo had tremendous resources when it gained independence, as president Denis Sassou Nguesso recalled last year during the 39th independence anniversary celebrations. "Throughout the country, anything can be cultivated and grown. The land has great quantities of high-quality wood, important fishing resources and a subsoil rich in oil, gas, iron, gold, diamonds and other minerals," he said.

Some analysts say the problems of the last 40 years are rooted in the fact that the ex - colonies were just not ready for independence at the time they got it. "During the sixties, the Africans were still slaves obeying their masters. So it was not possible for the slave to become the master while he was still under the rule of his former master," said Gabriel Baglo, a Togolese journalist.

"The Belgians were not interested in preparing the Congolese for independence", said Professor George Sayal. "The colonisers weren't in favour of the emergence of an elite which would succeed them. At independence, Congo had no doctors, just medical assistants."

According to Mamadou Fofana from Mali, "Independence was badly negotiated by our leaders because they only followed a political agenda and neglected the economy ... The Africans went too fast, they should not have chased the whites whose expertise was then needed," he said.

Herman Yameogo, the head of the ADF/RDA opposition party in Burkina Faso, attributes the situation in Francophone Africa to the absence of cohesion and regional co-operation despite the two regional entities previously set up by France - Afrique Occidentale Francaise and Afrique equatoriale francaise. "There was already a federation. If we had used this structure when the idea of nationhood was still uncertain, we could have built large entities which would have made our current integration efforts easier," he said.

For Amadou Seydou Traore, a Malian bookseller in his sixties the colonisers are responsible for most of the damage. "We are not going to be able to raise our heads because the colonisers on their way out have placed anti-people bombs which are more devastating than anti-personnel mines," he said.

"Today, the continent is by no means free of Western domination. Independence was generally granted under the pressure of international events. And the "independence" eventually turned out to be artificial," wrote Togolese historian Atsutse Kokouvi Agbobli in an opinion piece posted on the web.

He argues that today's wars in Africa are the result of the fierce competition between Western countries to gain control of the continent's resources. "The West definitively wants to seize the immense resources which abound on the continent, and destroy the African people," he said.

"Almost all the colonial territories of Africa are independent today, but in the form of weak pseudo-states eager to display the symbols of sovereignty such as the national flag, coats of arms, the national anthem, the diplomatic representations, etc.," Kokouvi Agbobli added.

According to the Togolese President Gnassingbe Eyadema, political independence is not an end in itself, but a necessary prerequisite to move towards economic independence. For Africa, he said, peace, security and stability remain the essential conditions for sustainable development.

For Edem Kodjo, the former OAU secretary-general, the former colonies collapsed economically because they did not know how to set up suitable strategies of development - autonomous and not completely dependent on the outside. "The structure of the African economies basically did not evolve for 40 years. Africa has always remained as the continent where one produces what one does not consume, and where one consumes what one does not produce," he said.

He called upon the African countries to reverse the export-minded strategy for an inward-looking strategy. This was already advocated by the OAU in the 1980s and should make it possible for Africa to develop its internal production and market, and hence finance its investments. President of the Togolese National Assembly, Mensa Agbeyome Kodjo agrees. "The solution for the African continent lies in its unity, peace and the integration of its economy. Our countries individually are not able to enforce adequate economies of scale which will ensure the competitiveness of our products on the international market and which will enable us to come out of economic dependence," he concluded.

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