

Thank you very much for your powerful speech Koert. What you said about Sudan reminded me that two years ago, I met a Sudanese man who was living in Niamey, the capital of Niger. We talked a lot about his experiences. He was in his mid-forties, which means he grew up and came of age in the Sudan of Omar al-Bashir, a military leader, and Hassan al Turabi, a clerical leader. He gave me vivid descriptions of his early education under the Al-Bashir/Al Turabi regime, which he described as a fascistic Islamist government propped by a harsh military despotism and wrapped in Arab supremacism and anti-Black racism. Quite the infamous dispensation. He told me of how he was indoctrinated in the ruling ideology, how he was sent to study in Algeria in the late 1990s, how he was at first shocked by all he saw there, people smoking, drinking on terraces, women in skirts and pants, how he then took a liking to it and realized how bad things were in Sudan, and how he ended up ascribing the difference between Sudan and Algeria to Algeria's French legacy.

That's when he decided to learn French in earnest, because he identified it with democracy, liberalism and the open society, everything that Sudan was not. In fact, he told me things about being the citizen of a democratic republic and how valuable that was in itself, which people around him in Niger took for granted. Sadly, when looking at the situation in Niger today, he told me he decided to settle down in that could because it looked like Sudan, but had benefitted from the same French influence he saw in Algeria and made a democracy out of it. I was amazed. At the time, Sudan was the only country in Africa where young people were actually dying for democracy. Elsewhere on the continent, it was not difficult to find young people who were pining for despots and military rule. How come?

Well, one simple response is that the story of the Sudan seemed to be the reverse of that of many countries in Africa, certainly those in the Sahel. The Sahel countries and Sudan had the same militarized, unsuccessful developmental political settlement through the 1970s-1980s. Then, in the 1990s, the Sahel countries, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, democratized virtually in lockstep. At that same point, Sudan was being taken over by the Islamist totalitarianism I have been talking about. Twenty years later, everyone was disappointed by his own regime, the Sudanese by the Islamist totalitarianism which, overtime, had become less totalitarian but more corrupt, and the Sahelians, by multiparty democracy, which, overtime, had become less multiparty, or more to the point, less inclusive, and more corrupt.

So there is a clear sense that what the anger really was about was governance. If we go back to that moment in the 1990s, which you described when you spoke about meeting young people full of hope about democracy, anger and hope were already about the fact that the military regimes were unable to provide effective governance, and the world of opportunity that it could unlock. There was hope that democracy would bring remedies. Not only would the leadership no longer be monopolised by one group, i.e., members of a single ruling party or a military clique, but their power would be checked by the rule of law and balanced institutions, and they would be accountable to the electorate and civil society. Thus, issues of governance would be solved in the public square.

Perhaps I am less severe than you about the result of this hope or dream. Some of this did come to pass, for example there was a decent amount of rule of law that took shape, something that was lacking entirely in the previous dispensation in the Sahel. But governance problems specific to the rivalrous nature of multiparty democracy—partisanship,

politicisation, polarisation— did quickly get in the way of the ideal operation of democratic institutions. By the mid-2000s I'd say, there was a common perception in Mali and Niger, though not in Burkina Faso, that the political class, a product of democracy which came to be seen as what democracy was all about, had made a mess of governance and foreclose the future. And thus, a strongman was needed. (Not in Burkina Faso because they had a strongman at the time and rather thought that democracy was needed). As a point of fact, a majority of Nigeriens supported President Mamadou Tandja's attempt, in 2009, to establish a constitutional dictatorship, and they attributed his removal via a coup d'état in January 2010 to a plot, by the French, to foist democracy on an unwilling people. I remember I spent an inordinate amount of time trying to debunk that opinion which was ubiquitous around me at the time, and I was very rarely successful. Malians said the same thing when ECOWAS and the international community – i.e., the Western states and the UN – compelled coup-maker Amadou Sanogo to return power to the civilians in 2012. You get the picture.

That being said, I don't think the Sahel would have fallen to military rule without two factors which were external to it, at least in large part. First there are the conflicts involving Jihadists in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and Tuareg separatists in Mali. Those conflicts would not have happened if Algeria did not corner its Jihadist foes of the 1990s into northern Mali, thus seeding Islamist militancy over there; and if NATO did not help insurrectionists destroy the regime of Col. Kaddafi in Libya, driving Tuareg militants into Mali. And second, there's the upsetting of the international order by the rivalry between the West and Russia, which made pandering to putschists more important than punishing them. I was asked in Bamako and Niamey by people who were genuinely astonished why the West, why the US were grovelling to the juntas. My hypothesis was that, at bottom, the West did not really believe in democracy in a place like the Sahel, and I guess it has the same excuse as those Sahelians who also did not believe in it: messy governance, corruption, plus the image of Africa. Although the ready reason was just that fear of the Sahel countries falling for Russia kept the West on its toes. Now the West has lost on the two fronts, it did not help save democracy in the Sahel; and the Sahel countries have become Russian pawns.

Let me end with two remarks: first, today society in those countries is divided between those who, for various reasons, adhere to militarised governance, which is as bad as you described it, and has some similarities with what went on in Sudan in the 1990s; and those who are now discovering that one should want democracy not just for its potential dividends in terms of good governance and the public goods and services which it brings, but for itself. Now I am hearing people in the three countries saying the same things about being the citizen of a democratic republic as the Sudanese man I met in Niamey, and with the same warmth of passion and emotion. Second: I think the greatest responsibility in this, and thus the biggest disappointment, lies with Africa's intelligentsias, and those of the Sahel obviously, whose job it is to think over the solutions for inventing efficient governance fit for Africa, and who mostly prefer the ivory tower. I do know it's a brutal world out there, your speech made it quite clear and I know it by experience, I probably lost a decade-worth of life expectancy trying to help sort Niger and the Sahel, and we see the result, at least for now. Still, no excuse, one has to do what one has to do. Thank you.