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September 12, 2011

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## 2011: Another 'Freedom Year' for Africa?

Posted: 16/7/11 22:57 GMT

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In November 1958, following the declaration of October 1, 1960 as Nigeria's independence day, Time Magazine [wrote](#): "The year 1960 is beginning to sound like freedom year for Africans. Also talking about independence on that date: French Cameroons, Togoland, Italian Somaliland."

1960 indeed turned out to be the Africa's "freedom year" - starting with Cameroon, on January 1, eighteen African nations gained their independence that year. 1960 was therefore one long year of partying, citizens gathering in large numbers in capitals everywhere from Lagos to Nouakchott, to witness fresh beginnings.

One imagines that some of the most widely trafficked images of that era would have been of Independence Day celebrations - beaming citizens waving a brand new flag and getting their tongues accustomed to brand new anthems.

I'm not sure anyone suspected that freedom 'sale' was a time-bound offer. For most African countries it was a downhill journey from independence, a continent-wide race to the bottom. Independence, it turned out, was all about self-ruin, not self-rule.

Over much of the next five decades, in many countries, refugee camps replaced those independence arenas, as gathering places. Where once people huddled around radios to listen to post-independence speeches by silver-tongued nationalists-turned-administrators, they now settled for martial music.

But now, after five decades of despair, 1960 appears to be around the corner, again. 2011 is promising to be another freedom year.

Or is it?

For one there is the Arab Spring - notwithstanding the disillusion that has crept into post-uprising Tahrir Square - shaking up once-untouchable status-quo's in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Second, there's what Ian Birrell pointed out in [an April 2011 article for the Guardian](#): "There are 19 elections due in Africa over the next 18 months." For a continent that made a name for itself as a graveyard of democracy, a flurry of elections is inspiring news - and a symbol of a new order of freedom.

Third, is the inspiring (debatable?) story of the independence of south Sudan.

Journalist and University Professor G. Paschal Zachary, [writing in The Atlantic](#) (in an article suggesting that the independence of south Sudan will sooner or later "[become] an invitation to independence for others") is right - in a much wider context than he probably imagines - when he says that "Africans are hungry for new political arrangements."

As it was in the late 1950s, culminating in that original "freedom year", so it seems to be, today. Behind the Arab Spring and the wave of democratic elections sweeping the continent are inchoate but recognisable freedom movements - spontaneous coalitions cutting across religious, ethnic, economic and gender divides - in a bid to open up spaces for citizens to enjoy better quality lives. And unlike in 1960, when the emphasis seemed focused on political emancipation from colonial invaders, in 2011 it is as emphatically economic as it is political, with the understanding that true independence goes beyond a mere transfer of power or privilege to encompass real, life-changing reform.

As African countries consider the possibilities of a second season of freedom, five decades after the first, they would do well to be wary of foreign do-gooders - whether from China or the West. There was an attempt by Tony Blair, through his [Commission for Africa](#), to proclaim liberty upon the continent in 2005. He declared that year - during which he assumed both the presidency of EU and the chairmanship of the G8 - 'the Year of Africa'. There was [much fanfare and speechmaking and report-writing](#).

It failed. "We were told several times by all kinds of do-gooders that 2005 was Africa's year," [the late pan-Africanist, Tajudeen Abdul-Raheem](#), observed, in a January 2006 essay. It ended up, he said, as "one in which so much was promised... and in which so little was achieved."

He also pointed out that (the essays are collected in [Speaking Truth to Power](#), published posthumously), under the terms of a debt relief deal, "Nigeria paid back more to Britain in 2005/2006 than the global total of British aid, thereby raising the question: who is aiding whom?"

And even when foreign powers seem to have the interests of the continent at heart, startling cluelessness about the real needs and dynamics of the continent often cripple efforts at being useful. "This dependence on foreigners, both financially and ideologically, is so pervasive that it cannot be ignored anymore," Abdul-Raheem lamented.

[Berlin's Conference Hall](#) was long ago replaced by Bretton Woods', in which much of the action that will most critically shape the continent's future continues to be decided. In the quest for freedom, it seems, African countries only succeed in trading one form of enslavement for another.

The '1960' project failed monumentally. Now another chance beckons. At the moment, sadly, there is little guarantee that this new freedom season will not go the way of the previous one.

But clearly, the biggest failure would be not trying for fear of failing again.

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