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Article — Digitized Version

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Intereconomics

Suggested Citation: Cohn, Hans (1971) : African socialism-success or failure, Intereconomics, ISSN 0020-5346, Verlag Weltarchiv, Hamburg, Vol. 06, Iss. 11, pp. 353-354, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02926253>

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/138554>

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African Socialism – Success or Failure

by Dr Hans Cohn, Port Elisabeth

It has contributed a great deal to the problems of many young and inexperienced African states that they have been thrust into an advanced international economic, social and political system. They are expected to fit into this system, although they are sometimes lacking the level of development to do so.

The problems confronting "Black Africa" can be classified into three main categories, namely economic, social and political. These three categories are interwoven and form a coherent unit. One group of problems cannot be solved without the others. A close look at the present African states reveals the following picture:

□ In the first place most of the African states are underdeveloped, that means, that there is no full exploitation of their natural resources, comparatively little industry and a primitive agricultural system. The result is unemployment and poverty combined with all social evils which stem from conditions like these.

□ Secondly, the former "colonial powers", especially France and Britain, have created states which are partly so small and insignificant, that their existence as independent political units constitutes a problem of its own. Compared with one of the "bigger" states, like Botswana with its 274,832 square miles, 22 African states are small. As far as populations are concerned, 10 states are inhabited by less than 2 mn people and another 13 by between 2 and 5 mn. To show some resemblance with modern states, these political units are—of course—permanently dependent on external assistance in some form or other.

Socialism à la Black Africa

These conditions have made it clear to most leaders of African states, that political independence does not mean anything, if it is not backed by economic independence. In fact, today it is considered to be one of the heaviest mistakes made in the days of "freedom fighting", that there was striving for political independence without the creation of the economic base for an existence as an independent state.

It goes without saying, that there is no private capital in these poor communities to replace the enterprising spirit of the former colonial powers.

As one does not want to create a kind of "neo-colonialism" by inviting overseas' investors, there remains only one possibility: socialism. When judging conditions in "Black Africa" it must not be forgotten that socialism was right from the beginning the only choice African leaders had. After a long and bloody struggle against colonialism one couldn't call back the same people who had previously been expelled in order to let them assist with the economic development of the same states which had expelled them. Today nearly all African leaders are in favour of some socialist system of state-ownership and control of the production forces. African socialism is however considered something new and entirely different to the "classical" kinds of European socialism, namely communism and democratic socialism. It constitutes a mixture of natural traditional community living and Marxism blended with Western European socialism.

No Chance for Communism

In the first place it is claimed that African societies have always lived and evolved within a framework of empirical, natural socialism which can be called "instinctive". The individual is considered a member of a group and defines himself in and by the group he belongs to. Group and individual are one and the same reality. Here, in the sphere of African ideas, can be found one of the main differences from European socialism which is collectivistic; African socialism is more group-minded.

Socialism in Europe developed into two main branches, namely communism and democratic socialism. Communism for its own reasons seeks some sort of alliance with the African states, but the Communist parties in Africa after some earlier successes have lost notable support. Yet the granting of large interest-free loans by The People's Republic of China to Zambia and the technical assistance for the construction of the rail link between Zambia and Dar-es-Salaam should give the world some food for thought.

Although China's help was mostly accepted as a result of Zambia's disappointment with the West because of Western attitudes towards "Apartheid", it will strengthen Communist influence on the African continent.

However, while there is no reason for underestimating the danger of growing "red" influence in Africa, one should not over-estimate it neither. "African socialism" has been accepted as a means for national liberation as well as an instrument of economic development and will not be replaced by communism.

The Arusha Declaration

It is, however, a great question, if this definitely new and typical African brand of socialism will be able to deal with the urgent problems of the "Black Continent". In this connection the example of Tanzania is of interest. Here the most significant experiment of indigenous socialism in sub-Saharan Africa is being conducted by President Julius Nyerere. This experiment involves a one-party political structure, nationalisation, the creation of village communes to change rural life, and a code of ethics for the country's leaders and politicians.

President Nyerere, a deeply religious Roman Catholic called "Mwalimu" (teacher) by his countrymen, announced his programme of socialism including the goal of economic independence by 1980, in a speech at Arusha, on the foothills of Mount Kilimanjaro, in January 1967. Now referred to as the Arusha Declaration, it is the most important document to emerge in Tanzania since independence. Already a few days after the Arusha speech wide measures of nationalisation were taken, starting with British banks.

The Tanganyika African National Union, established by Dr Nyerere 15 years ago, was declared to be the only party on mainland Tanzania. Government leaders and politicians, including Members of Parliament, were requested to give pledges of modest living. They are not allowed to earn more than one salary, to have directorships or shares in private companies, or to receive rents from houses. The result is that there is in Tanzania today less corruption than in any other African state. Furthermore President Nyerere introduced "Ujamaa Vijijijini" (socialism for rural development). This is based on "Ujamaa" (socialism) villages, small agricultural communities, formed by voluntary consent. About 600 Ujamaa co-operatives have been established, including fishing villages.

President Nyerere met—of course—with quite a number of difficulties. In some areas traditional

small plot farmers did not want to move into villages, while others feared loss of traditional family- or tribal-land. Elsewhere the villages were growing too fast for the Government to provide the planned water supplies in due time, to establish hospitals, schools, cooperative agricultural equipment and instructors. Yet altogether President Nyerere's socialist experiment was definitely a success, although he benefited from the fact that his country has no serious problems of tribalism such as those in neighbouring Kenya. Similar schemes were performed in other African states, for instance in Malawi, but President Nyerere must be considered a pioneer in this respect.

Although it cannot be denied, that the Arusha speech marked the beginning of a new era of constructive African socialism, it has not achieved what must be considered to be of the utmost importance: the creation of a new enterprising spirit. Tanzania has completely changed its rural life, but little is known about new industries, and the same applies to many other African states. Practically the only exception from this rule is Zambia, where President Kaunda's nationalisation measures have attracted the attention of the whole world. Generally speaking it cannot be denied that the exploitation of the natural resources of the African continent as well as the industrialisation of most of the African territories are even worse than the most pessimistic predictions.

Help from Former Colonial Powers

At the same time it is beyond any doubt that everything done so far was done by private enterprise. Companies like the "Zambian Anglo-American Corporation", "Rio Tinto", "Lonrho" and many more are prospecting in African territories for minerals, and quite a number of European industries have opened new factories in Africa. Does that now mean that African socialism was a failure, that it has not achieved what it was supposed to achieve? As the example of Tanzania shows, socialism has performed the miracle of changing a mediaeval society into a modern state and has replaced corruption and dishonesty by correctness and honesty. It was evidently right from the very beginning that a spirit of enterprise could not be cultivated within a short period of time and that foreign capital and "know-how" would be needed for many years to come — yet a socialist order was necessary to enable the state to become a partner in many newly established industries. It therefore may be wrong to call the present African system "neo-colonialism", as it is not a system of one-sided exploitation, but of co-operation — and that makes all the difference.