



Bayo Iribhogbe
Gathering 310, 2009
Oil on canvas
76 cm x 46 cm

© Courtesy of the artist

Bayostudio.com

Toward a
well-governed Africa

A democratic, prosperous, and peaceful Africa is now within sight.

Mo Ibrahim

Africa is blessed with an abundance of resources, both natural and human. The governance challenge is to harness these resources to transform the living standards of people across the continent. It is for this reason that I launched the Mo Ibrahim Foundation in 2006. We aim to stimulate debate about governance in Africa and to foster excellence in African leadership. Our core initiatives include the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, a comprehensive ranking of African countries according to governance quality. The index was designed as a tool to help civil society and government monitor national progress.

The premise behind our work is an acute awareness of Africa's potential: a youthful population, 30 percent of the world's mineral reserves, and a wealth of renewable-energy sources. Yet we continue to underperform and fail to realize our potential. The lack of development progress during the past 50 years can be attributed only to a failure of governance and leadership on our continent.

What Africa requires is excellent leadership that can entrench good governance at an institutional level. This goal requires a broader conception of good governance, which moves beyond the traditional emphasis on elections and legitimacy to an understanding of the components of a well-governed society. The index currently aggregates more than 80 outcome-oriented indicators; the foundation looks at the on-the-ground reality for citizens rather than at governments' claims, intentions, or spending. Moreover, citizens' experiences are assessed across the fullest range of public goods and services—from human development (poverty, health, education) to the rule

of law and from economic opportunity to physical security. It is worth noting that in measuring outcomes for citizens, we make no distinction whether services are delivered by governments, the private sector, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

This, then, is our definition of good governance: the successful delivery, by government or nonstate actors, of those public goods and services that citizens have a right to expect. By producing a robust, data-driven analysis to measure progress against this definition, we help citizens enter into a more constructive dialogue with the leadership and governments to assess their own performance more accurately. Encouragingly, our index has shown a broad upward trend in governance performance since its inception, so we can confidently assert that governance in Africa is improving.

Producing this annual index is a challenge, given the weakness of most national statistical offices in Africa. For example, we were forced to drop poverty indicators from our index because the available data did not meet our reliability criteria. This problem raises some interesting questions. How do you manage a developing country without reliable poverty data? How do you track progress toward the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, the first of which is a pledge to halve extreme poverty? We are working with other stakeholders to begin solving this data problem, but any solution will be slow and costly.

In addition to tracking the progress of governments, we recognize excellence in African leadership by offering an annual prize for exceptional performance in office. The Ibrahim Prize for Achieve-

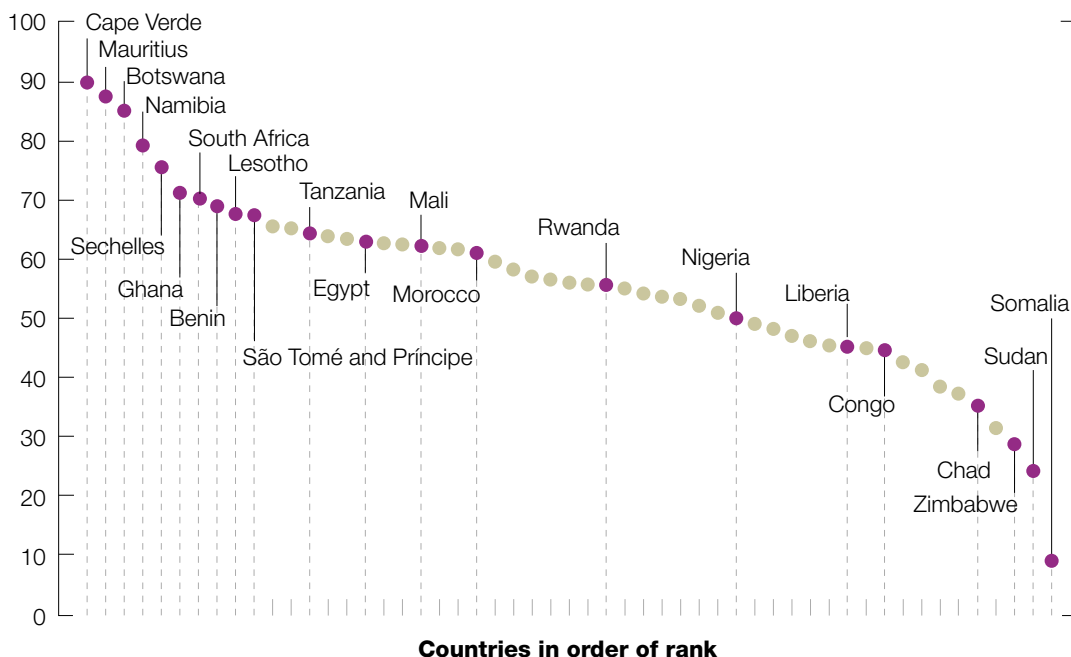
ment in African Leadership is awarded to an African executive head of state or government who has been elected democratically and leaves office within the constitutionally mandated term.

Our first three laureates—Joaquim Chissano (Mozambique, 2007), Festus Mogae (Botswana, 2008), and Nelson Mandela (South Africa, honorary)—exemplify the kind of leadership that Africa is capable of producing. President Chissano spent his term in office negotiating a peaceful settlement to Mozambique's long-running conflict and then initiating the process of reconciliation and reconstruction. His time since leaving office has been dedicated to mediating conflicts, including those in northern Uganda and Madagascar. President Mogae, building

on the solid foundations of his predecessors' work when Botswana's HIV prevalence rate was among the world's highest, demonstrated how natural resources can be a blessing to Africa instead of a curse. His work since leaving office has continued to focus on HIV/AIDS and on the governance of natural resources, and he is one of the UN secretary-general's special envoys on climate change. The career of President Mandela is well known to all.

The achievements of these men, in the most challenging of circumstances, are too often overshadowed by the continent's leadership failures, which meant that African presidents became synonymous in the media with despotism. It is important, however, to understand the political context. Most African countries gained independence at

Ibrahim Index of African Governance: Safety and rule of law, country's rank on a scale of 1 to 100, where 100 is the best possible score (selected countries named)



the peak of the Cold War—a devastating concurrence. While African political institutions were still weak, the colonial norms of autocratic leadership still prevailed, and the values of citizenship had not yet been established. Furthermore, leaders were courted by superpowers engaged in a quest for both resources and strategic allies. This exacerbated Africa’s “big man” culture and allowed corruption to flourish. The inevitable cost of that ideologically oriented external support was a failure to develop institutions, infrastructure, and the economy, as well as the tragic loss of millions of African lives.

It is no coincidence that from 1989 onward, Africa has experienced its most significant period of political liberalization since the independence movements of the 1960s. Between 1989 and 1991, more than 20 countries encouraged greater political participation by changing their constitutions or political practices. In the absence of the corrosive influence of the superpowers, the continent has been given another chance to build its institutions and develop.

The first decade of the present century saw the creation of the African Union (in 2002) out of the former Organization of African Unity. Regional Economic Communities are also gaining in capacity and clout, and the principle of noninterference in the affairs of neighboring states has been replaced by adherence to international norms. The recent coup in Guinea¹ and the recent unconstitutional conduct of Niger’s president² have led to the expulsion of both countries from ECOWAS (the Economic Community of West African States). Among other things, ECOWAS provides substantial numbers of peacekeepers in conflict zones throughout the continent. Governance at the continental level is improving and reinforcing the positive trend at the national level.

We are also witnessing the dramatic rise of African civil society—from media to parliaments to

community-based organizations. At independence, all African governments held a monopoly over broadcast media. Today the situation has completely changed. Almost every nation in Africa has private media organizations, and laws governing freedom of the press and freedom of expression have been written into the majority of African constitutions. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has over 150 private commercial radio stations.

The unprecedented growth of community organizations has educated citizens about their rights and responsibilities and mobilized civil society to demand more accountable government. Afrobarometer, an African-led opinion-polling initiative, recently found that in the 19 countries where it conducts surveys, 65 percent of the respondents reported attending community meetings and 55 percent were active in joining with others to raise issues. Afrobarometer also found that 70 percent of Africans support democracy and that 62 percent believe they should question leaders’ actions.

What’s more, the past decade has seen mobile telephony revolutionize Africa. By 2009, there were 400 million mobile-phone subscribers where there had previously been very few functioning landlines. The ability to communicate freely, easily, and cheaply has undermined the last vestiges of state control of information. Moreover, the availability of mobile telephones is intersecting with the rise of African civil society in unforeseen ways.

In Zimbabwe, for example, citizen election monitors visited polling stations across the country during the presidential election of 2008 and took photographs of the preliminary results there. Zimbabwean electoral law dictates that these preliminary results must be posted outside every polling station. They were then sent, by citizen groups via mobile phones, to a centralized database that produced a total. This information was instrumental in ensuring that the government was

¹ In December 2008, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara led a violent military coup after the death of Guinea’s dictator Lansana Conté.

² Niger’s president Mamadou Tandja attempted to extend his term of office in 2009— attempts that were rejected by both the parliament and the judiciary. Early this year, he was overthrown by a coup d’état.

not able to completely falsify the election result. During the violence after the 2007 election in Kenya, a brand-new tool for crisis mapping was created: ordinary citizens could send text messages about violent incidents that were then cross-checked, verified, and posted on an online map.

Crucially, the communications revolution and many of the major civil society developments were accompanied—and driven—by a large increase in the number of people able to take advantage of these changes. Africa's much-anticipated middle class is finally becoming a reality as more and more Africans escape the poverty trap and enjoy a greater degree of physical and financial security. These are the people who will further Africa's development; educated and hard-working, they are in a position to demand change and to know what changes they should be demanding.

We now find ourselves in a time when democracy is the accepted governance norm. Even governments that came to power by undemocratic means want to demonstrate their democratic credentials. While elections are by no means a proxy for a well-governed country, they are an important milestone in the transformation of Africa. It is clear that we are making sustained progress toward better governance on the continent and are now closer than ever to our shared goal of a well-governed, prosperous, and peaceful Africa. ○

We are witnessing the dramatic rise of African civil society—from media to parliaments to community-based organizations.