

An exchange on “Kenya: Social disintegration in country touted as African ‘success’ story”

31 January 2008

The following letter was received on “Kenya: Social disintegration in country touted as African ‘success’ story.” It is followed by a reply by the article’s author, Chris Talbot.

Your article wrongly sites Jomo Kenyatta as being a supporter of “African socialism.” Whatever one thinks of “African socialism,” respect for historical truth must be maintained, and here the fact is that Kenyatta was never associated with this slogan; indeed Kenyatta was resolutely opposed to anything with the slightest tinge of “socialism,” whether African or not. The slogan of Kenyatta’s regime was not “African socialism” but “Harambee” which, in as much as it has content at all, is a Swahili word literally meaning something like “together,” frequently used in the same context as the English words “heave-ho.”

It should also be noted that the main proponent of “African socialism” was Julius Nyerere’s Tanzania, with which Kenyatta’s regime had very hostile relations. Nyerere’s “African socialism” did involve taking colonial era property into state (rather than private) ownership, whereas colonial-era property relations were rarely upset in Kenya, and then only when it was to the direct personal advantage of Kenyatta, his family, and a small clique surrounding him. Like Mobutu in Zaire, Hastings Banda in Malawi and Houphouet-Boigny in Ivory Coast, Kenyatta made few or no pretences about the real nature of his regime.

Given the above facts, one can only wonder what led John D. Hargreaves, whom you cite as a reference for Kenyatta’s association with “African socialism,” to his statement about Kenyatta’s ideological orientation. I dare speculate that perhaps this establishment historian is not willing to acknowledge the culpability of Britain and the US in the disaster for the people of Kenya that was Kenyatta’s right-wing and pro-imperialist regime, and so he seeks scapegoats elsewhere.

LO

Kyoto, Japan

24 January 2008

Dear LO,

May I thank you for paying such close attention to my article on Kenya. We are very keen to discuss and draw lessons from the tragic events now unfolding in that country. In this regard I do not think it is helpful to draw such a major distinction as you do between the policies pursued in Kenya by Kenyatta and those pursued by Nyerere in Tanzania. Both were nationalist in the sense that they saw economic development within a nation state as the way to ensure a future for African people. Despite their differences of approach both ended up in the 1980s heavily indebted, and forced to accept IMF structural adjustment programmes—in other words they had failed to make any real development and ended up totally under the sway of Western banks. (I have written more on Tanzania in replying to a reader in “What happened to African ‘Socialism’?”)

It is true that Nyerere had some supporters in left-wing circles in the 1960s and ’70s who thought his approach represented a genuine move to socialism. But the measures he adopted—taking property into state ownership to which you refer, as well as limited welfare provisions—should in no way be confused with a socialist transformation of society which can be achieved only by the politically conscious mobilisation of the working class and poor peasants, and can in no way be confined within the national boundaries drawn up by imperialism. Otherwise we would have to include a whole list of countries where such national development measures were adopted in the category of “socialism,” from Cuba and Algeria to Burma and Cambodia—surely a travesty of Marxism and Trotskyism.

It was the weakness of such bourgeois nationalist regimes, always effectively dominated by imperialism, that resulted in them employing “socialist” measures and rhetoric. To some extent also they could pose as socialists by resting on the support of the Soviet Union against the West so the collapse of the Soviet Union accelerated the demise of national development and import substitution strategies.

Turning to the quote I took from John D Hargreaves, *Decolonisation in Africa*. Whilst Hargreaves is by no means a Marxist I must say that I have found his history of the postwar period in Africa a serious and objective account that is well worth studying. The quote does say that “African Socialism” was a cloak behind which capitalist policies were pursued which seems to me to be an accurate characterisation.

In a more detailed and recent history (Paul Nugent, *Africa Since Independence*, Palgrave, 2004) we see that in the mid-1960s Kenyatta and his party, the Kenya African National Union (KANU), were faced with a left-wing revolt from “a powerful backbench lobby” (p. 155). Incidentally, this lobby included Oginga Odinga, father of Raila. Kenyatta attempted to head off this revolt by putting out a document entitled “African socialism and Its Application to Planning in Kenya.”

Nugent notes that “it was clear from the small print that this was a conception of socialism which placed economic growth first and expected societal benefits to result from the trickle-down effect.” So whilst he may not have gone as far as Nyerere, Kenyatta did put forward a theory of “African socialism.” Oginga Odinga and his group eventually broke away to form the Kenya People’s Union (KPU), which by 1969 was banned and its leaders jailed. Their policy was closer to that of Nyerere’s version of “African socialism.” It was, as Nugent comments, “not exactly revolutionary stuff but enough to present KANU with a problem.”

I hope that goes some way towards answering your points and we welcome further discussion.

Regards,
Chris Talbot



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