

# Beyond the Euphoria: Examining the Unfulfilled Promises of Independence in Africa and Pathways for Renewal in the Contemporary Era

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## Abstract

The attainment of independence across Africa from the 1950s onwards generated widespread euphoria, hope, and expectations for democratic governance, constitutionalism, economic transformation, and social progress. Drawing on historical and contemporary analyses, this paper examines why these expectations were largely unfulfilled in many post-independence African states. It revisits the independence euphoria, emphasising how nationalist movements envisioned political freedom, self-determination, and the establishment of accountable and democratic institutions. The paper also analyses the factors that undermined these aspirations, including institutional foundations, the adoption of constitutions without constitutionalism, authoritarian consolidation, corruption, ethnic tensions, and pervasive governance failures. While proposing pathways for renewal in the contemporary era, this paper argues that revitalising the original ideals of independence requires strengthening constitutionalism, promoting good governance and accountability, enhancing the notion of separation of powers, combating corruption, fostering inclusive socio-economic development, and deepening regional and international cooperation.

(Image credit:  
Keystone/Getty Images)

## Introduction

Euphoria of independence entails the high expectations, optimism and hope which citizens had during the decolonisation period when African countries were becoming independent and indigenous democratic governments were taking over power from colonial masters. However, the wave of decolonisation, which was accompanied by euphoria and hope for good democratic governance and constitutionalism from the 1950s onwards, was negated when most African leaders became authoritarians like their colonial masters by the 1960s. Examples from countries such as Zimbabwe, Zambia, Zaire (DRC), Rwanda, and So-

malia are employed to illustrate how democratic promises quickly gave way to repression, maladministration, economic decline, and conflict. Thus, the first part of this paper explores the euphoria of independence, whereas the second part examines why African countries have failed to meet the expectations of citizens. The paper notes that although promises of independence were significantly compromised, Africa's political, economic, and social transformation remains possible if reforms are guided by constitutional values, resilient and independent institutions, and collective regional commitment.



## The Euphoria of Independence

In pre-colonial Africa, independent African kingdoms and empires such as the Shona in Southern Africa, Shonghai in West Africa and the Ashanti Empire in Ghana were generally governed by Kings and Queens and their councils through centralised and pyramidal structures of authority [Sesay 2014]. They were also systems of governance, such as the Igbos in Eastern Nigeria and the Massai in Kenya, with well-organised administrative structures but a less centralised ruling elite. Thus, in the pre-colonial era, African societies were independent and governed themselves. Between the 19th and

20th centuries, European imperial powers conquered Africa, thereby subjecting Africans to their rule [Parker 2007]. Stephen Ocheni and Basil Nwankwo [2012:48] define colonialism as 'the direct and overall domination of one country by another based on state power being in the hands of a foreign power'. For example, when Britain colonised Nigeria between 1900 and 1960, it managed to politically dominate the country from different perspectives.

In countries such as Nigeria, Zaire and Sudan, colonialism brought 'disarticulation of African eco-

nomy, education, trade, market, transport and currency institution' [Ocheni & Nwankwo 2012:48]. Colonisers racially discriminated against black Africans, displaced them from their traditional lands and relied on them for cheap labour in colonial mines and plantations. In the words of Princewill Dimkpa [2015], 'Africans suffered from unfair taxation, cultural confusion, and expropriation of land, exploitation of labour and the loss of their mineral wealth to Europeans'. Due to the oppression, racial segregation, and the dehumanising conditions which black Africans were subjected to under colonial

rule, by the late 1940s, independence movements advocating for democratic rule and self-determination became stronger. Thus, the decolonisation period witnessed increased resistance against colonial rule in support of nationalism and independence. In some countries, such as Kenya, Algeria, Congo, and Angola, the decolonisation process involved violence, widespread arrests and detentions, and political turmoil and revolts.

Due to increased resistance and insistence on the need for change, colonial powers began to retreat and surrender power to African governments from the 1950s onwards. According to Roland Oliver and Anthony Atmore, when the then British Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, was concluding his 1960 African tour, he delivered the famous ‘winds of change’ speech to the South African Parliament in Cape Town, saying:

**“We have seen the awakening of national consciousness in people who have for centuries lived in dependence on some other power...the wind of change is blowing through the continent, and whether we like it or not, this growth of national consciousness is a political fact.”**  
[Oliver & Atmore 2005:271]

For example, following riots and revolts against colonial rule, Morocco, Tunisia, and Sudan regained their independence in 1956. A year later, in 1957, Ghana attained its independence from colonial rule. Thus, between the 1950s and the 1960s, most African countries attained their independence.

However, the struggle against colonial rule and the eventual attainment of independence was generally associated with euphoria, renewed hope and expectation for genuine democratic governance and constitutionalism in African countries. As Sankalp Gurjar [1960] puts it, ‘as the wave of independence swept through the continent, it was widely believed that a new era of hope and optimism awaited the people of Africa.’ Economically, the hope was that African countries would be transformed into modern industrial economies to compete with the West, ‘programs, policies or activities that seek to improve the economic well-being and quality of life for a community’ [British Columbia 2024] would be implemented and that endemic challenges such as poverty, unemployment and inequalities would be resolved. In fact, the position of Africa on the international market was optimistic, with the prices of cash crops and minerals produced in Africa increasing by 1960.

Moreover, since most African states were quick to declare themselves “democratic” and promulgate constitutions, the hope was that they would build strong democratic institutions, promote plural politics, unity and respect for fundamental rights and freedoms. Furthermore, the hope was that the governments would uphold the essentials of constitutionalism such as popular sovereignty, the supremacy of the constitution and the rule of law, political democracy, representative limited government, separation of powers, police governed by law and judicial control and an independent judiciary in the process of limiting and restricting government power [Lawjure 2024]. Finally, the hope was also that indigenous governments would practice good governance through accountability and transparency strategies, adequate civil society participation, strict adherence to democratic principles and values, and the promotion of sustainable development. Most first African presidents, including Zambia’s Kenneth Kaunda, Ghana’s Kwame Nkrumah, and Malawi’s Hastings Banda, captured the euphoria, expectations and hope for a better Africa in their independence speeches.

## Disillusionment after Independence

Although independence was attached to hope and expectation for a better Africa, most democratic indigenous governments in countries such as Zambia, Sudan and the then Zaire failed to meet the expectations of citizens soon after independence. In fact, in some cases, the so-called democratic governments became even more oppressive and detached from the ordinary lives of the citizens than colonial masters. African governments ‘had inherited systems which they had fought hard to topple and change, only for them to now find them useful as tools of repression and oppression’ [Golooba-Mutebi 2021]. For example, Zimbabwe gained its independence in 1980 in the midst of euphoria and high expectations after a long period of violent encounters and resistance against British rule. At independence, former President Robert Mugabe and the Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU PF) as the ruling party made the ‘promise of significant change, articulated in socialist language, in which the country would transform the structures inherited from colonialism and over a decade of UDI to improve living conditions for the majority population’ [Danseureau 2000:151]. In less than three years, Robert Mugabe and his government began tolerating political corruption and exhibiting authoritarian practices. Twenty years later, in 2000, 80% of the population lived under the poverty datum line, increasing strikes and demonstrations reflected the dissatisfaction of the citizens, elections were being marked by violence and intimidation, and the very basic tenets of constitutionalism became blurred [Danseureau 2000:151-152].

Similarly, instead of engaging in the process of democratisation and democratic consolidation, Kenneth Kaunda’s government in Zambia was characterised by unconstitutional and undemocratic elements such as one-party rule, corruption, assassinations and disappearances of political opponents, human rights abuses, and lack of respect for the rule of law [Mushingeh 1993:100-102]. Thus, African democracies failed to achieve the ambitious objectives and goals they set for themselves, which included ‘democratisation of politics and respect for civil liberties; fighting disease, poverty, and ignorance, which meant building functioning health and education systems and promoting prosperity; promoting national unity and ending all forms of marginalisation’ [Golooba-Mutebi 2021]. This demonstrates that the independence euphoria was short-lived due to the descent into authoritarianism and/or dictatorship in countries such as Zaire, one-party regimes in countries such as Zambia and Malawi, ethnic divisions in countries such as Ruanda and Burundi and endemic civil wars in countries such as Somalia, which became prevalent mainly between the 1960s and 1980s.

Having explored how the euphoria of independence in most African countries was short-lived, the main question concerns why post-colonial governments failed to meet the expectations of citizens. Several reasons can be cited on why there has been dichotomy between the independence euphoria and the disappointing outcome. Firstly, the failure of post-colonial governments to meet the expectations of citizens can be partly attributed to the legacy of colonialism itself. This is partly

because indigenous governments inherited political and socio-economic systems and dynamics that affected the process of democratic consolidation, governance and development. For example, in his article, African Economic Development and Colonial Legacies, Gareth Austin [2010:11] argues that ‘colonial rule and African actions during the colonial period affected the resources and institutional settings for subsequent economic development south of the Sahara’. Because colonialism did not promote political development, transparency and accountability and respect for the rights of the indigenous people, the same trend seems to have been somehow adopted by some post-independence governments. Moreover, post-independence governments in countries such as Zaire, Sudan and Ruanda inherited weak institutions, including a lack of plural politics and undemocratic elements, which then enabled them to easily consolidate their power.

Secondly, post-independence governments adopted constitutions without paying attention to constitutionalism. In his article entitled Constitution without Constitutionalism: Interrogating the African Experience, Aborisade Olasunkanmi [2018:272] argue that most post-colonial countries in Africa had constitutions which were devoid of constitutionalism because although they successfully drafted constitutions, they did not practically apply the basic features of constitutionalism, such as respect for the rule of law, separation of powers, and respect for fundamental rights, among others. In fact, ‘the so-called constitutions were instruments for terrorising the poor and the weak, legitima-

## Addressing the Challenges

ting corruption and privatisation of the state, and rationalising the suffocating of civil society and subservient relationships with imperialism' [Olasunkanmi 2018:272]. Through their inability to apply the basic tenets of constitutionalism, African leaders such as Kenneth Kaunda, Mobutu Sese Seko and Hastings Kamuzu Banda failed to meet the expectations of citizens by making the euphoria of independence a reality.

Moreover, the inability to create strong democratic institutions and implement good governance strategies led to maladministration, corruption, and a lack of transparency and accountability, which, in the long term, eroded public trust in these governments. For example, political instability and ethnic conflicts affected development and the consolidation of democracy in countries such as Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and South Sudan. Similarly, in the Rwandan Genocide, 'the attempted extermination of the Tutsi by the Hutu people resulted in 800,000 deaths, the majority being Tutsi' [Scholar Blog]. In such countries, the inability of post-independence governments to instil unity, promote integration and the common good through social, economic and political transformation eroded the citizens' independence euphoria.

Having discussed why the euphoria of independence in most African countries has failed to meet the expectations of citizens, it is important to examine how this can be addressed today. Firstly, it is important for African countries to consistently pursue the original goals and objectives which in the first place instilled the euphoria of independence, which include self-reliance and robust economic development programmes and strategies [Golooba-Mutebi 2021]. At independence, several presidents insisted on the need for Africa to embark on initiatives and governance strategies that would promote sustainable economic development and self-reliance. For example, Zimbabwe has excellent human capital and abundant natural and mineral resources, which, when properly managed, can lead to the country's development and economic transformation. However, the need for self-reliance and robust economic changes requires good governance. The United Nations, the African Union and other regional and international institutions have indicated that good governance is crucial for development and social, economic and political transformation in Africa.

For example, it is poor governance that led to the economic crisis in Zimbabwe in 2008. As Kłosowicz [2009] has argued, 'in so-called dysfunctional states, bad governance can damage an already weak country's economy.' The same observation was made by Nobel Laureate Chinua Achebe, who, with reference to Nigeria, 'The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate

or water or air or anything else' [Mail and Guardian 2020]. As a way of improving governance in Africa, current governments might have to make institutions such as the judiciary that are vital for good governance more effective, enhance transparency and accountability, encourage plural politics and active involvement of the public in decision-making processes, and enforce inclusive governance by fighting against inequalities and poverty.

Thirdly, there is a need for political leaders in Africa to ensure that their political systems meet the standards of constitutionalism so that the constitution as the higher law may practically establish and limit government power, thereby promoting and protecting fundamental rights and freedoms. The inability of most African countries to adhere to the tenets of constitutionalism has made Africa a theatre of massive human rights abuses, crimes against humanity, genocide, and the den of oppressive and authoritarian regimes. Thus, there is a need to deal with the challenges by adhering to constitutional principles and values in Africa through strengthening constitutional frameworks and key democratic institutions, guaranteeing judicial independence, and creating an environment in which the media and civil society can operate freely, among others. As African countries move towards a constitution with constitutionalism, 'the government and its agencies should take action on reported cases of acts of indiscipline, corrupt government officials, political fanaticism, lack of concern for people's welfare, conflicting rules and regulations and poor management of resources' [Olasunkanmi 2018].

## Conclusion

This paper explored the euphoria of independence in Africa, why African countries have failed to meet the expectations of citizens and ways in which this can be addressed today. Apparently, the independence euphoria which accompanied the period of decolonisation, when African countries were attaining their independence, did not last because the indigenous governments did not practice good governance and constitutionalism, and that development was never fully realised. Moving forward, there is a need to address these challenges while ensuring regional and international cooperation. Resolving the challenges will accelerate the economic, political, and social transformation of Africa while addressing other issues such as political instability, ethnic conflicts and impunity.

Finally, there is a need for regional and international cooperation. For example, one wonders why Southern African countries such as Botswana and South Africa are undergoing development, whereas Zimbabwe and Malawi have remained stagnant. Similarly, one wonders why Nigeria's GDP amounted to nearly \$477.4 billion in 2022, whereas Malawi reached only \$13.16 billion in 2022, which the Malawian government actually regarded as a milestone [Réaction Africanews 2024]. Clearly, there is a need for countries to work together and promote coope-

ration through regional blocs such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), continental bodies such as the African Union and international bodies such as the United Nations. For example, strengthening regional integration, cooperation and collaboration among SADC countries can facilitate mutual development, assist in the consolidation of democracy, and monitor constitutionalism through effective democratisation processes in the region.

Rosemary Anieze, wearing the sash of "Miss Independence," is popular as she parades outside the National Stadium in Lagos, Sept. 28, 1960, after winning the title from 15 other contestants in Nigeria. © AP Photo



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