

## Book review<sup>1\*</sup>

*Legacies of power*  
*Leadership change and former presidents in African politics*  
(Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council.  
Southall,R. and Melber,H. (eds). 2006).

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The issue of political leadership remains a serious challenge to African state particularly after independence. Until the 1990's African states struggled to deal with leaders who were not willing to vacate office after their term of office has expired. Hence, the dominant perception that African leaders rule for their entire life and do not relinquish power voluntarily. This perception was dominant in the years after independence. However, it must be noted that in recent years there were few examples of leaders who acted against this perception.

Southall and Melber's book chronicles the problem of leadership change in the former British African colonial states. They examine this problem through case studies examining the years of iconic Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Rawlings of Ghana, and Charles Taylor in Liberia. In grappling with problems presidential transitions the writers concluded that problems of presidential transitions can be attributed to the extremely weak foundations for democracy in most African states. They also point out that access to state power, and employment opportunities depended on patronage. Similarly, accumulation of wealth was (and still is) dependent on the connections with state elites who presides over multinational corporations. Therefore, African polities became arenas of contestation in which incumbents used the power of their capital to influence political leadership often with coups, secessions, assassinations and general skulldug-

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gery. Consequently few African presidents were prepared even to contemplate the idea of retiring from office, and with the stakes so high, opponents were viewed as threatening not merely the political but also the physical survival of the incumbents in power. This was especially so where they had assumed office as leaders of anti-colonial movements which had created nationalisms which give little room to opposition politics. Some such presidents came to identify themselves with the state itself. Some assumed 'President for life' and others came to assume 'indispensability and longevity'. Southall and Melber cautions that "when such mortal gods fell from power and failed to flee, they could expect little but persecution, prosecution and punishment by their successors for real or concocted sins of corruption, dictatorship and economic mismanagement, regardless of bargained or constitutional immunities. Southall and Melber assert that even if they did escape to exile, they would continue to be regarded as threats to stability of the new regime.

Southall and Melber's book has resonance with, for example, our current political scenario in South Africa and Zimbabwe. Nelson Mandela handed state power to Thabo Mbeki with ease and there was no strifes about the presidential transition. However, the current succession debate within the ANC reminds us of the problems of presidential transitions which was largely experienced in most African states. Although the current succession debate in South Africa differs with that in most African state, it can be equated to such experiences particularly when one brings the issue of moral integrity in the debate. Despite the availability and use of elections as a mechanism for transfer of power it seems the current set up, particularly within the ANC, allows for the current president of the party to utilize his influence to determine his successor. This weakens democracy, and allows patronage and connection to elites used as a means to gain access to state power. And those not favoured by the elite are charged with corruption and economic mismanagement for rights reasons and even wrong reasons.

Similarly, the situation in Zimbabwe echoes the sentiment raised by Southall and Melber that some presidents assume office for life and become indispensable. Zimbabwe has known no any other leader since independence. Robert Mugabe has been the president of Zimbabwe for almost three decades. Although some may argue he is elected into that position by the electorate who exercise their democratic right willingly, the problem is that Mugabe 's leadership is currently running the economy of that country down. Surely he overstayed in the leadership position. Perhaps Mugabe, like other African

former presidents, harbors post presidential phobias of being charged with corruption, human rights abuse and economic mismanagement. He is a president for life. He has fears that if Zimbabwe can get another leader he may be charged with corruption, human rights abuse and economic mismanagement. Thus ruling for life saves him from the persecution, prosecution and punishment. It also means his continued leadership is not in the interest of the Zimbabwean, but continues to rule to buy time. If he has no post-presidential phobias he should hand over power voluntarily like Nelson Mandela and Julius Nyerere.

Southall and Melber's book can shed light into Mugabe's understanding of his post presidential life and his relationship with the opposition. Southall and Melber argue that there are solid grounds for newly installed presidents to be suspicious of their predecessors. In nearly all African states the incumbents accepted predecessors reluctantly, particularly if they have a history like that of Mugabe whose relationship with the opposition is hostile. Southall and Melber point out that what complicates the African presidential process has been a mystique that often came to surround the first generation of heads of state who were projected as 'fathers of the nation' and rule by 'divine right of kings'. As result persuading such leaders to hand over power is violent, difficult and protracted. The opposition is often labeled mistresses of the former colonial power and thus removing them from the national aspirations of the people. The opposition is removed from the liberation struggle national agenda.

Southall and Melber's book also discusses the positive aspects of African political leadership. In a chapter written by John Daniel the enormously constructive role played by Nelson Mandela in stabilizing and consolidating democratic transformation as well as conflict resolution is brought to light to illustrate possibilities that are there in the African continent. Nelson Mandela's role can be equated with the role of Julius Nyerere in Tanzania. Chapter ten captures the story of Julius Nyerere who pushed for democratic reform while also engaging in peace-making in Africa and campaigning for a better deal for poor countries globally. Leadership examples of Mandela and Nyerere are needed in Africa if we are to realize the economic renaissance. This one of the requirements of NEPAD.

After reading Southall and Melber's book I was confronted with the question: Does leadership matter? This question is important for better understanding of Africa's problems of poverty. This question compels us to scrutinize leadership in relation to national development. It seems that most African leaders

assume presidential positions for self-aggrandizement. In the lights of this question, Kenneth Good and Ian Taylor argues in chapter three that although Botswana is projected as a model for African democracy, the recent presidential transitions served to consolidate the interest of the elite than ameliorating the plight of the poor. Similarly, David Moore in chapter six argues that Robert Mugabe's determination to hang on to power is structurally entrenched and nationalism is held ransom by the system Mugabe created to propel his leadership. The idea of African leaders serving their own interest is also captured in other chapters.

Southall and Melber's book also suggests some solution to problems of presidential transitions.

- Balancing transitional justice against stability: Southall and Melber suggest that former presidents need to be given immunity to consolidate stability because if democracy is to be nurtured. Persecuting and prosecuting may not always be good for certain African states because former presidents have garnered support which is entrenched in the state apparatus and have capacity call violent and often military power through proxies.
- Office term limits need to be adhered to and the expectation of the former presidents need to be institutionalized. In some cases constitutional provisions need to guarantee the safety of the former presidents.
- The people must demand accountability of state officials even before they retire so that it becomes a standard practice for leaders to be accountable to the people. People must not wait for the next elections to make leaders account. The civil society need to engage in vigorous contestation to hold leaders accountable.

All in all Southall and Melber's book is an interesting read for scholars in history, political science, diplomacy, sociology and development disciplines. It offers insights into leadership dilemmas Africa currently faces. The book stimulates careful further observation and analyses progress in the area of institutionalized political power in Africa. However, the discourse would have enriched if the voices of the people were included in the discussions. People have different experience of the problems of leadership in this continent. The experience in Botswana bears testimony to this. Most of the time when analysis about African problems of leadership is done the focus is on the leader not what the people want and how the problem affects them. Southall and