
Lessons in Destructive Leadership from Africa



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Africa is a cautionary example of the need for checks and balances against the abuse of power.

“A large chair doesn’t make a king.” Sudanese proverb

Africa may not have a monopoly on despots but it seems to have had more than its fair share. While the decolonisation of the continent in the middle of the 20th century offered greater freedom for its diverse ethnicities, cultures and languages, it also left a hole in its structure – both socially and politically – creating unique psychological and institutional forces that account for the contrasting natures of the regimes that swept into power.

Transformational and tyrannical leaders

As noted in my recent article [**Destructive and Transformational Leadership in Africa**](#), co-authored with **Jennifer C. Sexton** and **B. Parker Ellen**, many of the political crises that have emerged in modern Africa stemmed from small rebel movements. Over the course of two decades at

least 40 successful coups (and many more unsuccessful uprisings) stirred up political and social turmoil. The ensuing uncertainty, ambiguity and chaos created an environment ripe for the development of destructive leadership, supporting narcissists, many of whom would refuse to tolerate dissent and who used violence as a tool to control people and hold on to power. It was also the time of the rise of Nelson Mandela, the first president of post-apartheid South Africa, who, through his capacity for forgiveness and ability to bring opposing forces together, became one of the world's most admired and revered political leaders. Unfortunately, Mandela was one of the few exceptions to the Africa story and in many more cases the lust for power pushed despots beyond respect for human rights.

Whether gaining control via military might or by manipulating the ballot box, once in power it is hard for despotic rulers to let go. Power is addictive. Living in constant fear of being overthrown, they are often driven to violence by paranoia feeding off the poor judgment that comes from narcissism and hubristic tendencies. What's more, they may resort to belligerent behaviour to give the country a sense of purpose and solidarity and to distract attention away from their own shortcomings.

The examples are numerous. **Ahmed Sékou Touré** of Guinea, who was hailed as a great liberator, remained in power until his death, using death camps to remove any opposition. **Idi Amin's** reign of terror as the 'butcher of Uganda' reached legendary proportions, while **Jean-Bédél Bokassa**, a former colonel who seized power in the impoverished Central African Republic and went on to proclaim himself Emperor, allegedly engaged in cannibalism and destroyed the foundations of civil society in a country that has experienced strife ever since.

To this list of tyrants can be added those who have denied their country democratic rule; leaders who became addicted to power and whose regimes outlawed opposition parties or accorded little or no political freedom. In Sudan, after staging a bloodless coup which he called the "Salvation Revolution," **Omar Hassan al-Bashira** bolished trade unions and suspended all political parties. In 1993, he named himself president and instituted Islamic law. Since becoming president of Cameroon **Paul Biya** has staged a rigged election every few years to justify his continuing reign while Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo's long-standing regime in Equatorial Guinea has made it, according to domestic and international observers, one of the **most corrupt** and oppressive states in the world.

Unfortunately, despite the bloodshed, few despotic leaders are ever held accountable for their acts.

Confidence or hubris?

The destructive journey for these and other despots begins when they start to create their own reality and refuse to see anything but what they want to see, ending up living in a hall of mirrors. Their sense of self-righteousness, arrogance and inability to accept others' ideas impair their effectiveness, at great costs for their citizens.

Finding the balance between “confidence/hubris” is a critical challenge for any individual in a leadership position. A certain degree of narcissistic behaviour is essential for a leader to succeed. It can be a source of strength that inspires followers, fosters cohesion and instigates great change. But all too frequently in the African context, the destructive side of narcissistic leadership raises its ugly head. Actions, originally interpreted as bold and imaginative, are gradually exposed to be in reality short-term opportunism. Pushed by the force of excessive narcissism, these dysfunctional leaders disregard their people's legitimate needs. As the balance tips toward hubris, problems arise, impairing good judgment, contributing to the despair of the people.

Regulatory oversight can moderate this process but sadly enough, most institutions and regulatory bodies (if they have the chance to come into existence) are unable to stand up to a despotic ruler's actions. Furthermore, the way in which such leaders are portrayed by the media can heighten their degree of narcissism and hubris, to the extent they may lose the ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Such leaders begin to live in their own world, encouraged by the sycophants that surround them. Eventually, the relationship between leader and followers will turn into *folie à deux*.

An environment susceptible to tyranny

What makes despotic-autocratic leaders particularly dangerous for the world community is not only their tendency toward violence, as the ease with which that tendency can be indulged. Destructive leadership requires more than a potentially flawed individual with a need for power. It also requires the presence of followers who are susceptible to such behaviour. All too easily, *Homo sapiens* will resort to regressive behaviour patterns.

Although despots repress their citizens, they may use as an excuse the argument that they are protecting them population from external threats; that they are trying to create a sense of community; that they need to install law and order. They don't mention that the reason that they do what they do is to snuff out any threat to their rule. Unfortunately, susceptible followers are often seeking the safety or identity that a tyrannical leader can provide. Given humankind's general feelings of helplessness, they will easily resort to a common defence mechanism: "identification with the aggressor." No wonder that these despotic leaders can so easily induce societal regression.

Tyrants and despots often use ideology to provide a framework to rationalise their actions. In times of chaos, these kinds of ideologies can reduce uncertainty and give people a **common goal** to work towards. In Uganda; for example, President Idi Amin was able to win support from his constituents by expelling foreigners and attacking Western imperialism. His actions were perceived as asserting the interests of Africa, and as such, were initially met with support from many Africans.

While a strong absolute power may help a population feel secure, particularly after a period of unrest, it doesn't make for robust institutions that can serve as a countervailing force to the abuse of power. Inflated by excessive self-belief, despotic leaders will ignore expert advice and listen only to those who tell them what they want to hear. Lacking the ability to compromise and bargain, they often subvert key state institutions (the civil service, judiciary, media, to name a few) to serve their own interests. In addition, the absence of robust institutions is also a prescription for corruption. Recent estimates suggest as much as **US\$50 billion leaves Africa every year as illicit financial flows and stolen assets.**

Overlapping experience, disparate personalities

In contrast to the narcissistic, power-abusing nature of destructive leadership, Africa has had some **transformational leaders** whose focus extended beyond immediate self-interest; leaders who motivated and inspired followers, providing a compelling vision of the future. The image of **Nelson Mandela** striding onto the rugby field at Ellis Park stadium wearing a Springbok jersey to present the trophy to the team captain was a powerful symbol of reconciliation, restoring dignity to the black majority while reassuring white South Africans that they need not fear revenge.

This is in stark contrast to the behaviour of **Robert Mugabe** whose iron fist and vindictiveness towards, not only the country's white population, but the segment of black compatriots who hold opposing views, turned a once rich country into a basket case.

While it is likely that Mandela possessed some innate leadership tendencies, genetics are not the explanation for transformational leaders. Mandela, like other “world class” leaders, was shaped by early **childhood influences**, including adversity. He attended the University of Fort Hare, home to other future African leaders, including Kenneth Kaunda (Zambia), Yusuf Lule (Uganda), Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), as well as Robert Mugabe. Regardless of this overlap, the differences between Mandela's and Mugabe's developmental experiences and Mugabe's darker qualities, such as hubris and narcissism, which may help explain their contrast as leaders.

Training leaders for the future

Leadership scholars have much to learn from the unique context of Africa. Further research along this line can help African countries begin to educate and develop their young leadership base to produce more Mandelas and fewer Mugabes. Understanding how leadership can transform the vision and mission of countries can help governments re-instill pride, cultural understanding and peace between nations.

Giving future leaders the tools to become more reflective can only help the continent's journey to a peaceful and prosperous future.

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