International Clout in the Political Salience of Traditional Leadership in South Africa

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November 16, 2021

Abstract

This paper argues that the international economic order, continental politics, and cultural movement have primarily shaped how traditional leaders evolved in South Africa. In this context, the overarching neoliberal economic influence can be understood from two interlaced factors: Firstly, post the soviet disintegration, South Africa necessarily underwent a structural transition in the sphere of political economy that opens up space for international actors. Secondly, the cultural plurality was increasingly recognised and protected, which further propitiates traditional leaders entrenching South Africa’s market economy. Therefore, understanding the political salience of traditional leadership in South Africa cannot be separated from the international clout that impinges on the local governmentality.

International Clout in the Political Salience of Traditional Leadership in South Africa

Abstract: This paper argues that the international economic order, continental politics and cultural movement has largely shaped the manner in which traditional leaders as an institution evolved in South Africa. The overarching neoliberal economic influence in this context can be understood from two interlaced factors: Firstly, post the soviet disintegration, South Africa necessarily underwent a structural transition in the sphere of political economy that opens up space for international actors. Secondly, the cultural plurality was increasingly recognised and protected which further propitiates traditional leaders entrenching with the market economy of South Africa. Understanding the political salience of traditional leadership in South Africa, therefore, cannot be separated from the international clout that impinges on the local governmentality.

Keywords: International Political Economy; Traditional Leadership; Neoliberalism; Governmentality; Sub-Saharan Africa; South Africa.

The institution of traditional leadership has generated huge scholarship due to its political salience in at least 152 democratic UN countries (Baldwin and Holzinger, 2019: 1751). The political salience of traditional leadership may be understood from three perspectives: internal (domestic) and external (global) dynamic forces and interest in the conceptual abstraction of ideas across the disciplinary spectrum. Firstly, some scholars have emphasised on the internal dynamics, like consolidating democratic processes and governmentality (modes of government) in the country as the reason (Ainslie and Kepe, 2016), others cited the institution’s relation with the African National Congress (ANC) as the major reason (Kompi and Twala, 2014), while others like Janine Ubink (2008) emphasised on the legal status of the institution and increasing interest in the academia to study the relation between tradition and modern state structures. Some scholars have emphasised on the political processes and questioned whether traditional leadership is ‘resurgent’ or ‘persistent’ arguing that they have remained active in the political sphere throughout (Beall, Mkhize and Vawda, 2006). Secondly, while democratisation itself is putatively seen as an external concept for the sub-Saharan Africa, its related economic and cultural phenomenon in relation to traditional leadership has been less dwelled upon. Claassens (2018, 2021), Koelble and li Puma (2011), Williams (2010), Ainslie and Kepe
(2015), Ubink (2008), Kompi and Twala (2014), Ntsebeza (2005, 2020), et al have written substantially in abstract as well as in empirical terms yet with clear proclivity to law, accountability, and governance. This essay seeks to emphasise on the external perspective of theorization on traditional leadership that shows significant causal relation with the contemporaneous international dispensation.

This paper argues that the international economic order, the continental politics and cultural movement across countries has largely shaped the manner in which traditional leaders as an institution evolved in South Africa. Few scholars like Comaroff and Comaroff (2004, 2018) and Oomen (2005) have emphasised on the role of capital and the international forces that influences the institutionalisation of traditional leadership. But the focus of their works was mostly on the agency of traditional leaders. To stress on the overarching economic influence in this context can be understood from two interlaced factors: Firstly, post the soviet disintegration, South Africa necessarily underwent structural transition in the sphere of political economy that opens up space for international actors and secondly, traditional leaders become entrenched with the market economy of South Africa through various ventures, holdings and investments as major stakeholders that closely interacts with the horizon of global enterprises since its transition into liberal democracy in 1994 (Commaroff and Commaroff, 2009; Claassens, 2018). These economic factors are consequential to the cultural sphere as well. Identity factors like ethnicity and language which are significant features of forming cultural artefacts remain ubiquitous in perpetuating the interest of the institution of traditional leadership (Commaroff and Commaroff, 2009). The African continent saw the rise of cultural rights group in the latter part of the nineteenth century and South Africa was not an exception. In order to unravel this complex yet interrelated factors that underpins the political salience of traditional leadership, the global perspective in terms of historical, economic and cultural context becomes significant.

The international political economy in the late twentieth century and the early twenty first century played a crucial role in the rise of culture-based rights group in South Africa (Oomen, 2005). Traditional leaders are ‘chiefs of various ranks’ (Ntsebeza, 2020: 2) who govern an area that may comprise of a village to a kingdom through traditional political institutions (Baldwin and Holzinger, 2019: 1748). Leadership in these areas are mostly determined and accepted through culturally defined customary merits. In South Africa they have considerable influence in the traditional communities (mostly rural areas) constituting ‘more than 18 million’ people (Claassens and O’Regan, 2021: 157). In the world at large, according to Baldwin and Holzinger (2019: 1749), ‘traditional political institutions are pervasive, affecting at least one quarter of the world’s population, the majority of which live in semidemocratic or democratic states.’ The reach and depth of traditional political institution around the world makes it significant to study even in terms of understanding the process of democratisation and the closely kneaded international political economy as it affects the lives of many people.

Until 1994 democratic election in South Africa, since 1948, the traditional leaders were power centers just below the colonial ‘supreme chief’ (a lieutenant governor) in the apartheid system (ibid.: 159). Consequently, the traditional leaders were largely seen as benefactors of the colonial patronage at the expense of their ‘subjects’ (Mamdani, 1996). They have been also described as despotic and authoritarian (ibid.). Many citizenship rights were curtailed for the blacks during the apartheid (ibid.; see also Claassens and O’Regan, 2021; Thipe, 2014). So, in the new democratic South Africa, they are mostly thought of as vestigial and soon to be ebbing away (cf. Commaroff and Commaroff, 2018). This observation however is not an elision of a historical account that experienced ‘progressive’ traditional leaders who remained steadfast with the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa (Ntsebeza, 2020).

The state of political engagement in the rural hinterlands in the first decade of post-apartheid South Africa then was relatively much more eschewed from the reach of governance of the new democratic mechanisms than that of the urban centers (Koelble and li Puma, 2011). This felt vacuum of the government was primarily because the democratically elected local level councilors could not instill confidence in the traditional community (Rugege, 2003). In this regard, one of Koelble’s interviewee responded: ‘when you talk to the chief, something will happen; when you talk to the council, you know nothing will happen’ (Koelble, 2005: 9).
While governance was facing legitimation crisis between the notion of modern state mechanism and the traditional mode of governing to the extent of becoming political, mostly in areas occupied by traditional communities, the new international economic neoliberalism and its political policies accentuated the crisis as it ‘circumscribed’ the reach of the state in the rural South Africa (Oomen, 2005; Williams, 2010: 16). The Washington Consensus that promoted capitalism did not encourage to reach out for the rural and poor South Africans through their government (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2018: 14). As highlighted before, this was in the political backdrop where the ANC had a minimum reach in the rural hinterland of South Africa. The ANC then was supported by soviet-bloc which was seen as one inspiring country (Ntsebeza, 2005), but it lost one of its important political allies when the soviet disintegrated in the beginning of the 1990s. So, when the international community was celebrating the significant rise of the neoliberal economic forces which widened the political vacuum in the government, particularly in rural South Africa, it was also limiting the prospective state to take care of the rural areas. The ‘progressive’ traditional leaders took this opportunity to fill the void, as a voice of the rural areas in South Africa. Being able to carry the popular sentiments of the rural traditional community mostly, the ANC had very less choice but to co-opt the traditional leaders as an integral part of the local government as they threatened to boycott elections in some influential pockets of the Republic of South Africa less they are accounted in the dispensation of the new democratic institutionalisation.

After they were constitutionally recognised, the traditional leaders interestingly began to form private firm for investments in 2000 (Commaroff and Commaroff, 2009: 6). Even the ANC could not shy away from the new development as the traditional leaders did not just gained international sympathy but they began to coalesce with the market force (Claassens, 2018). This economic development seems inevitable as Koelble (2005: 9) noted that any decisions of the ANC that might suggest veering off the course set by the ‘Washington Consensus’ in the first decade of its post-apartheid democracy gave economic setbacks. According to Roux (2004) and Kantor (2004), ‘the abrupt devaluation of the Rand, despite essentially positive “economic fundamentals”, in 1996, 1998 and 2001 illustrate how dependent the country is on positive sentiments in the derivatives and other international financial markets’ (cited in Koelble, 2005: 9). Observing this international economic effect on South Africa, Koelble observed that:

The consequence of any policy decision that might indicate (or even hint) to these markets that the South African government might steer away from its conservative fiscal and monetary course (or merely the threat of it) is severe volatility in the exchange rate of the currency. As a result of these limits on liberation, the South African state has been unable to aggressively address the vast social and economic legacies of apartheid, particularly in the rural areas so willfully neglected and systematically destroyed by the colonial and apartheid regimes. The failure of the state to touch the lives of rural citizens and the concomitant failure of the democratically elected but ineffective local authorities has opened up several spaces for traditional leaders to re-affirm their cultural, social, economic and ultimately political power in all sorts of manners (Koelble 2005: 9).

The manner in which traditional leaders nudge their interest was persuasive and appealing as they have also been arguing for the ‘African ways of doing things’ that was pitted to be amenable with the new international development (Koelble, 2005: 9). This international political economy and its consequent political development coincided with the increasing wave of cultural and indigenous rights movement in the 1990s influencing the structure of the economy and government in Africa (Commaroff and Commaroff, 2004). This was further invigorated by the rise of multi-party democracy in independent Africa compelled by the Bretton Woods institution entailing economic and political ramifications especially in South Africa (Ntsebeza, 2020: 2; Nuesiri, 2012). According to Rouveroy van Nieuwaal (1996) the democratic transition enabled kin-based support groups to flourish (cited in Nuesiri, 2012: 30).

Moreover, the African continent was in the surge of tradition and customs with colonial rule being done away with. The political current was such that the neoliberal international interaction was also becoming increasingly coterminal with tradition and culture. This came at the backdrop when right after the formation of the Congress of Traditional Leaders in South Africa (Contralesa), a pressure group, in 1987, the
ILO initiated the Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries in 1989 and it contributed to the homogenising and strengthening of the indigenous people (Oomen, 2005: 9). This was also the time when in South Africa, every form of political institutions was vying to assert their legitimacy in the governance structure and thus the ‘cultural card’ became one of the most prominent one to pit for the traditional leader’s interest (ibid.).

According to Oomen (2005: 4), the resurgence of culture includes, ‘reviving traditional systems of governance, emphasising autochthony in politics, granting groups rights to indigenous peoples or first nations.’ Cultural diversity and the right for its recognition was becoming a distinguished feature in the world politics. The indigenous people began to be increasingly recognised as ‘first nations’ in many advanced economies of the world. The 1989 ILO Convention was followed by the UN’s 1994 Draft Universal Declaration on Indigenous Rights, where it recognised the urgent need to respect and promote the inherent rights and characteristics of indigenous peoples, especially their rights to their lands, territories and resources, which derive from their political, economic and social structures and from their cultures, spiritual traditions, histories and philosophies (ibid.: 10). Ultimately, the political tone was such that ‘tribes were trendy, culture was cool, and of which chiefs could be central constituents’ (ibid.).

Along with the rhythm of the international neoliberal economic forces, the traditional leaders were astute enough with the favour received from the cultural card laid out in the global arena. Even more opportune was the general re-emergence of traditional leaders in the African continent which also played a major role in the resurgence of traditional leaders in South Africa (Ntsebeza, 2005). The new wave of multi-party democracy was a new thing in Africa then (Nuesiri, 2012). Since the 1960s, many countries had adopted a one-party system of government which relegated the necessity of conducting election during the early decades of independence. Exerting such dominance, sub-Saharan African countries like Mozambique, Nigeria and Tanzania made laws that would scrape away the rule of traditional leaders. Mozambique was, before the early 1990s, a contesting point between the ruling Mozambique Liberation Front (FRELIMO) and Mozambique National Resistance (RENAMO). When the ruling party (FRELIMO) discarded the institution of traditional leaders, some traditional leaders moved to the opposition camp. In the entailing years, this infuriated the civil wars between FRELIMO and RENAMO where the latter was supported by traditional leaders. The ANC witnessed this violence as they had their government in exile in Mozambique (Ntsebeza, 2020). Though traditional leaders have almost no power in country like Tanzania, in northern Nigeria, the powerful traditional leaders were in conflict with the national government as they were not given any role in local government administration (Nuesiri, 2012: 34). These political phenomena that was operating in the neighbouring countries allowed ANC to take a calculated move in the rise of Contralesa in South Africa. Even the then ANC leaders like Nelson Mandela was praising traditional leaders in the early 1990s as he was released from the prison (Oomen, 2005; Ntsebeza, 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff, 2004). Traditional leaders were encouraged to unite South Africa through their congress. As Samuel Huntington (1991) described the ‘third wave of democracy’ to have started in the 1970s (cited in Diamond, 1996: 20), in this light, Diamond (1996: 26) described the decade of the 1990s to be a period of its ‘diffusion’ showing empirical ‘democratic breakthroughs’ including the sub-Saharan Africa ‘with the collapse of Soviet and East European communism’. Thus, the international context created a conducive environment and gave the needed fuel to the rising traditional leaders in the South Africa’s politics in the early formative years of post-apartheid government.

References:


