

WHY ETHIOPIA OUTPERFORMS AFRICA'S DEMOCRACIES – THE STANDARD DIGITAL NEWS (SATIRE) (PRESS RELEASE) (REGISTRATION) (BLOG)

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COMMENT

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia now has a light rail system. It was constructed on schedule, and largely within budget. Lagos, Nigeria has been trying to build a light rail system for the better part of a decade. It is over-budget and has been marred by allegations of corruption. Talking large infrastructure projects, the Nigerian capital, Abuja, is even worse. For a tidy sum of \$470m Abuja had planned to install CCTV cameras to boost security. The project ran over-budget and all Nigerians had to show for it were toy CCTV installations that did not work. Sounds familiar? It should, it is pretty close to what happened to our own attempts to install security cameras in Nairobi. What do these comparisons illustrate? They illustrate what happens when you have a focused and serious elite class. It is not about democracy or accountability. Ethiopia is a paragon of neither. Ethiopia's economic performance, and specifically its ability to manage large scale infrastructure projects, is a function of having an elite class that is disciplined and knows where they want to take their country.

Of course Ethiopia is also autocratic. The EPRDF government tops the charts of countries that have jailed the most journalists. The EPRDF also rigs elections. Their overall human rights record is nothing to sing about. But you see, state capacity and ability to deliver on projects has little to do with democracy. Stateness, or state capacity, is a tool. It is the ability to get stuff done. It is a tool that has to be sharpened purposefully. It does not magically arise. That is why the only countries that have developed are those that had an elite class that purposefully set about creating state capacity – to record births and deaths, to impersonalise their bureaucratic systems, to ensure that government was not completely captured by a set of special interests. If you consider Europe, these developments occurred well before the era of mass suffrage and popular democratic elections. State-building preceded democracy.

This is not to say that democracy is not good for state-building. It is. Remember that state capacity is a tool. And for the tool to be useful for Wanjiku, you need politicians accountable to voters. That is where elections come in. Elections are merely supposed to make the state work more efficiently. They should not be seen as ends in themselves. It is for this reason that if we had a serious elite class, we would already be thinking about ways to make our elections more efficient in enforcing vertical accountability; while at the same time strengthening our state capacity.

The 2010 Constitution is a fantastic basic document. But the fact of the matter is that by weakening the office of the president, especially in the specific instance of doing away with the provincial administration, it weakened our state capacity. This was normatively desirable for a lot of Kenyans. The old Provincial Administration, for good reasons, was synonymous with unaccountable dictatorship. However, the problem is that we never thought seriously about alternatives. How was the national government going to project power in the grassroots? What would have

been the most efficient system to incentivise the national government to improve its capacity for service delivery?

These are basic organisational questions that we need to grapple with. They are not political. Again, when you think about China, Vietnam, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, these are not democracies. Their leaders are not accountable to voters. But they deliver on public projects. It is sad that most of the navel-gazers we have for leaders often attribute these successes to the fact that the four countries are dictatorships. Wrong. These countries are successful because their leaders consciously invested in boosting state capacity – the raw ability to get stuff done. In our case, we have consciously invested in decreasing our state capacity. We allow criminal gangs, sugar and ivory smugglers, and drug traffickers to infect our body politic and compromise our state capacity – including our ability to enforce security and collect taxes. We hire incompetent people and give them no real targets, then proceed to reward them with hefty salaries, allowances and per diems.

I recently asked my students whether they would rather live in Rwanda than Malawi. They chose Rwanda. Malawi is a democracy. Rwanda is an autocracy. The former is hopelessly poorly run, and just last week begged for food aid. The latter has invested a great deal in state capacity and has a proven record of meeting its targets. We can be better than Rwanda and Ethiopia because we have vertical accountability. But to get there we must consciously and seriously invest in our capacity to get stuff done.