

Socialism in Africa

Socialist ideas have been in Africa before the advent of colonialism at the turn of the nineteenth century. African socialisms represent various combinations of African thinkers, politicians, and activists' absorption with and reconfiguring of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European socialist ideas and practice. The sources are multiple, from trades unions and contact with European workers, to affiliations with European political parties, and through contact with Pan-African (West Indian and African-American) radicals. Many African thinkers and movements have identified with various strands of social democratic and Marxian forms of socialism, seeking to indigenize them to Africa.

The rise of African socialisms as a movement coincides with the early phases of nationalism and national development, the high point of which was the non-aligned movement and Third Worldism. African socialism as practice began with the first self-proclaimed socialist-nationalist revolution in Africa, Gamal Abdel-Nasser's (1918–1970) 1952 Officers Coup in [Egypt](#); and intended with globalization meeting [South Africa](#)'s thwarted redistributive social democracy.

All African socialisms shared overlapping features that provided bases for nationalism and approaches to postcolonial development and nation building. First, was a combination of state ownership, an equitable distribution of wealth, and increasing citizen well-being; second, was the urgency of conquering underdevelopment, of "catching up"; third, was creating relevant noncapitalist institutions that would shape economic development; and fourth was creating well-balanced social relationships of citizenship that could establish cohesion between people and the state.

Prior to the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in [Russia](#), socialist ideas and practices were mooted among sections of the African middle and working classes. The *Sierra Leone Weekly News* in 1913 compared union-based socialism in industrial [Europe](#) with the supposed hallmark of an indigenous socialism, African "hospitality," auguring in sentiments (and myths) subsequently invoked by African Socialist-nationalists and political leaders. Striking laborers and clerks in Lagos in 1897 had neither socialist ideas nor organization to mobilize them against low wage labor policy for Africans, yet African socialist movements begin with the development of a modern work force.

Where industrial capitalism had penetrated more deeply in Africa, as in South Africa, Egypt, and [Algeria](#), burgeoning workers and trade union movements would become subjects of communist and socialist ideas. Established primarily by settler, expatriate or European unionists and intellectuals, these movements learned their socialism in metropolitan-based parties. Striking white miners between 1906 and 1907 and from 1913 to 1914 in South Africa would beckon the call of (white) trade unionism and socialist organizing and practice, as would black workers in 1918. Socialism's claim to social justice would uniquely shape South Africa's national experience, where a class divided by race would force the national question to the center of discussions about the nature of socialism and independence in South Africa.

The first communist party in Africa (and in the Arab world) was formed in Egypt in 1921, where textile and transportation workers became the subject of communist attention after World War I. The general orientation of Egyptian Marxists and socialists was directed to the Arab world, which would persist into Nasserism. Egyptian communism remained small; having a large impact upon intellectual [Marxism](#), debating many important questions about socialism in a backward country; it had little impact upon Egyptian politics and was unable to develop a mass following among a large indigenous working class, a well-developed trade union tradition, and millions of Egyptian peasants, or fellaheen. The party eventually disbanded in 1965 through in-fighting and Nasser's repression.

Until the formation of the 1970s Afro-Marxist regimes, movements espousing revolutionary Marxism were nonexistent. An exception was one the large metropolitan, European dominated, Algerian Communist Party, formed in 1936. By the 1950s it had disgraced itself by constantly placing the French interests above Algerians'. Two other exceptions were Sudan Communist Party and the South Africa Communist Party (SACP). In the early twenty-first century the SACP remains numerically strong, while the large Sudanese Communist movement, founded in 1946 under the influence of Egyptian Marxists, played a role in the nationalist movement, retaining significant influence in Sudanese politics before General Gafur Nimeri's murderous purges in the early 1970s.

Marxist influence would find homes within African socialism. Soviet and Chinese communism were benchmarks of socialism throughout colonialism, nationalism, and the formative years of national development. With few exceptions, like self-management in Algeria (1960–1965), alternative or academic socialisms had little foothold in Africa. If communist party formation was prohibited during colonialism, many independence parties (especially in Francophone Africa) were modelled on communist parties. Many African leaders, even when seeing communism as threatening, were impressed by the rapidity of its modernizing achievements through centralization, planning, and the one-party state. The [Cold War](#) also demanded positions on communism; most African states preferred charting unaligned vistas between it and Western capitalism.

North African, "Arab" Socialisms

Nasserite Egypt (1960–1974), Bourguiba's [Tunisia](#) (1954–1986), Algeria from Ahmed Ben Bella's and Boumediene's through the reforms of the mid-1980s Qaddafi's [Libya](#) (1969/ 1977–) represented the beginning and end of North African socialisms.

Like the Cold War, the Egyptian Young Officer's coup would prepare a template for much of the continent's independence with its one party, state capitalist socialism; it also demonstrated efficacy in achieving power through armed force. Originally hostile to socialism, Nasser eventually used "Arab" socialism to rationalize confiscating large landed estates, foreign nationalizations, and outlawing political and religious opposition, all identified with holding back national development. A trademark of African socialisms was invoking development in the "people's" name, and populist state capitalist socialism became a practice of

legitimation. The imperative of rapid economic and social development through planning was put forward as guaranteeing modernization and equitable redistribution that only the state could be charged with. Multiparty democracy was viewed as a disruptive extravagance the progress of the "people's" developmental state could ill afford, and trade unions, once a ground of radical support, were expected to have no role other than to support the aims of the state.

One finds similar rationalizations in all other North African socialisms, despite differences over, for instance, the extent to which there was a need for the state to own socialized property, rather than direct the redistribution of wealth. In Habib Bourguiba's modernist appeal to socialism at independence in 1956 through the Tunisian nationalist Neo-Destourisme; in Algeria's attempt to come to terms with the reconstructive aftermath of a brutal war of independence, in the response to the chaos of the early years under Ahmed Ben Bella's (1918–) chaotic self-management; and Houari Boumediene's (1965) coup, auguring in "Real Socialism," the rationalized normalizing of the revolution combining technocratic development through state-led industrialization; as well as Ghadaffi's coup and eventual 1977 announcement of Jamahiriya (the "people's" state) socialism for Libya. In their different ways, each sought to balance national identity as Islamic, with the demands of modernizing under the quasi-secularist nationalizing, one-party state. Each feared fragmentation, and each sought centralized political and economic control to overcome it. Each restricted political parties, undertook a more or less centralized state for fear of unfettering dormant interests uniting around religion, class, and ethnicity. All claimed to have modern egalitarian and equitable ends, and all wanted to justify themes consistent with religion, while keeping the ulemma and conservative classes allied with them under control, ensuring religion did not interfere with its national cohesion and national development.

Only Ghadaffi clung to fictionalizing socialism's name as real; by the early twenty-first century Tunisia had abandoned all simulation, embarking on the most controlled secular march toward modernizing the society and the economy; while Algeria continued to live with the effects unleashed by the (1978–1991) economic and political liberalization, forces repressed by one-partyism. From the breakdown of the state from ethnic loyalties to the violence of Islamist backlash in the face of annulled elections in 1993, the facade of socialism was all but forsaken.

African Socialists

Nkrumah's [Ghana](#) (1957–1966), Ahmed Sékou Touré's [Guiné](#) (1958–1984), Modibo Keita's [Mali](#) (1960–1968), Julius Nyerere's [Tanzania](#) (1960–1985) Leopold Sédar Senghor's [Senegal](#) (1960–1981), and Kenneth Kaunda's [Zambia](#) (1964–1991) are the primary exemplars of "south of the [Sahara](#)" African socialisms.

African socialists were nationalist-politicians who believed the anthropologically problematic idea of a long-established ethos within the precolonial community's traditions of extended family networks of social mutualism, social egalitarianism, and a consensus system of political order. This order could be modernized but able to avoid conflicts inherent in European class societies, as in Tanzania's Julius

Nyerere's (1922–1999) vision of a policy of education for self-reliance that would enable a willing peasantry to accept collective decision-making in villages organized by the state. Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah (1909–1972) is often identified as the major figure, not because he was the most original; nor because of his execution of socialism when in power. It lies, rather, in his posthumous stature among Pan-Africanists and because he left a corpus of writing after his overthrow in 1966 that identified his credentials as a rebirthed radical. While in power, however, his political policies followed a familiar trajectory of one-party socialism—the imprisonment of the opposition, the banning of strikes by the same unions he would demand take up the cause of revolutionary socialism after his overthrow. There is little in his thought or, indeed, in much of his practice that to varying degrees, one cannot find in Mali's Modibo Keita (1915–1977) or in Guiné's Ahmed Sékou Touré (1922–1984), or for that matter much that is different in the North African socialist variants. In the case of Touré, he claimed that because prior to Guiné's independence in 1958, colonialism's inability to create class antagonisms was because extensive private ownership barely existed. The Africanization of Marxism could begin by building upon the supposed solidarity of a precapitalist caste-based society. His early, distinctly radical rule tried to create the cadres for a socialist revolution. As his policies failed, Touré responded with greater centralized rule and fiercer social oppression, which was mirrored in a collapse of the economy and livelihoods in Guiné.

Consistent with notions that the one-party state was best suited to carry out nation-building and development tasks, after independence Modibo Keita promptly moved to declare the Union Soudanaise Independence Party the single party of the Malian state, pursue a socialist policy based on extensive nationalization, and court both the [Soviet Union](#) and [China](#). Malians were constructing socialisms through choosing the best from their Islamic past, where duties to the weakest and poorest in society were part of Afro-Islamic egalitarianism. Keita genuinely believed economic and financial decolonization from [France](#) and the establishment of socialist structures throughout the country. To this end, from 1961 before his overthrow in 1968, Keita's regime would maintain the necessity of structural sectorial reforms.

In contrast, Leopold Sédar Senghor (1906–2001) was a pragmatist for whom socialism was a cultural vision. Less interested in immediate structural transformations in the economy, he was more interested in an identification of the alleged mores of African societies, which, he claimed, were forms of social humanism. For Senghor, African socialism as culture never translated, except pragmatically, into much more than a cultural disposition that could modify some of the more corrosive values of western individualism. There were never the attempts at the large-scale socialization of production found among the more radical African socialists, in part because of the intimate economic and cultural relations Senegal had with France, and also because of the various conservative members of coalitions that supported the ruling Union Progressiste Sénégalaise (UPS), especially the Islamic Brotherhoods, who maintained some control over much of Senegal's main export commodity, groundnuts.

Political compromise rooted in production and key resources made political commitments appear rationalizations. So, Kenneth Kaunda's (1924–) eclectic African humanistic justification of state nationalization and state welfare through bringing together elements of Christian and Fabian socialisms

allied with a selective liberalism was joined to a putative African collectivism. If it appeared well meaning, it could also appear a rationalization of state patronage through Zambia's major industry, copper: accumulation by political elites through nationalization. Profiting from soaring copper prices on world markets for over a decade after independence, many urban Zambians benefited from state subsidies and an expanded welfare system. Less than a decade later, however, these services shrunk under the burden of low world commodity prices and accumulated debt, revealing that the socialization means of production benefited a freeloading bureaucracy that contributed little but their vacancies.

Between 1965 and 1977, Nyerere's *ujamma* (familyhood) socialism was the highest profile African socialism and development. Initially meant to promote an egalitarian ethos, and a way of forestalling the development of classes and inequality, it failed because of a long price depression for its export commodities, costs sustained in removing Idi Amin from power, and the inability for the state to genuinely understand the needs of its peasantry. Peasants, the supposed source of *ujamma* modernization from below became subject to state-sanctioned bureaucratized replacement of traditional rural households with the forced displacement of nine million rural dwellers into planned resettlement "development" villages.

Nyerere said that villagization was not socialism but a technical decision concerned with the concentration of resources in settlements with little input from the peasantry; socialism and its full appreciation would come later. They never did. Very much reliant upon foreign aid for development programs, Tanzania was anything but self reliant. After a decade of economic failure, and compelled by the demands of international financial institutions (IFIs) to adjust and stabilize its economy, by the time he left office in 1985 there was no more African socialists.

Afro-Marxism

Marxist socialisms grouped under the rubric of Afro-Marxist regimes, which came into and out of existence between 1963 and 1995, primarily coming to power through military coups. They include Congo's Masekela-Debat to Sassou Ngeusso (1963–1991), [Ethiopia](#) under Mengistu Haile-Miriam (1974–1991), [Somalia](#) under Siad Barre (1969-1991), Mathieu Kérékou's Benin (1972-1991), and Didier Ratsiraka's [Madagascar](#) 1975–1993, 1997–). Also included is Zimbabwe's Robert Mugabe (1924–), who came to power through armed struggle and subsequent elections, and who also used Marxist-Leninist rhetoric. African "scientific socialisms" only real affinities to Marxism-Leninism and most practicing African socialism were one-partyism, the nationalization of industries, and authoritarianism. There were also Marxists, like the Cap Verdian Amílcar Cabral (1924–1973), the Angolan Augustino Neto, and the Mozambiquans Eduardo Mondlane and Samora Machel, whose successors came to power inheriting very unstable states in the violently uneven and unresolved Luso-phone national liberation struggles. All regimes accepted some alliance with the Soviet Union. The one actual social revolution, which sought to socialize production and attempt to actually transform society, was the Ethiopian Revolution (1974), which was also the most bloody, killing thousands in its wake. Afro-Marxists also came into existence at a time

when there was a revivification of Third Worldism, but also at a time when world markets were contracting, and debt was beginning to grow.

Afro-Marxism's rhetoric and practice were divorced from the realities they enforced themselves upon. Few understood, even cared to understand, both peasant life and the ethnic environments within which they inhabited. The exceptions were the assassinated leaders, Cabral and Eduardo Mondlane (1920–1969). For both Marxism had little utility unless it allowed activists and peasants alike to understand their worlds as ends to participation and well being, and both felt that understanding the materially cultural aspects of the populations that sought liberation was practically and normatively important. Striking about all of Afro-Marxist regimes is how easily they either collapsed or so easily altered themselves from Marxist-Leninist parties to liberalizing recipients of neoliberal adjustment policies. The regimes and leaders that did not collapse transformed themselves into devotees of the advice offered by (IFIs). Often leaving a bloody bequest of failure and death, these regimes' rhetoric was as deep as their commitment to actually revolutionize the relations and forces of production.

Conclusion

Whether Marxist, social democratic, or state-capitalist, African socialisms reflected diverse political economies and polities, covering theoretical intents, ideological perspectives, political movements, cultural and regional orientations, revolutionary struggles, and formerly actually existing socialist states. Over half of Africa's states have celebrated themselves as socialist or social democratic, have identified socialism in the pages of their liberation charters, and/or have retained "socialist," or socialism in their constitutions.

Like most other African political systems, African socialisms failed to meet people's aspirations and needs. They sometimes employed opportunistic and brutal ambition to thwart people's wishes for greater freedoms and choices over the nature and status of their needs. Equally, they frequently had their hopes aborted as casualties of Cold War realpolitik and vacillating economic desires of a world capitalist system.

African socialism's prospects look inauspicious. The wave of post-1970s, liberalization, and the collapse of the regimes, or death of many important leaders associated with African socialism's preeminence and disgrace, also saw many of these socialisms go with them. Increasing constraints of economic deprivation and debt, the imposition of adjustment and stabilization, and the demand, internally and externally, for greater pluralism and political choice, further limit prospects for renewal. African socialism became a consensus metaphor for failure—of the centralization, authoritarianism, and inefficiencies of state malfunction. The history of socialism in Africa suggests much failure and a history of false promises; it also suggests, however, that those failures arise from development failure, a failure not generic to Africa and not to socialism alone. African socialism was a history of intent; as such it should also be remembered as past optimism for what it promised, even where it couldn't fulfill it.

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Pablo L. E. Idahosa