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# **ADMINISTRATIVE DECENTRALIZATION IN FORMER FRENCH AFRICA: NEW HALLUCINATIONS OR A NEW POLICY?**

Jean du Bois de Gaudusson\*

The subject of local organization in Africa is inexhaustible and has abundantly been studied by specialists of all sciences. Yet it remains a very delicate one as shown by the contrasting and diverse opinions and by the numerous paradoxes that seem to exist on this matter.

## **I. Paradoxes and Contradictions on Local Government in Africa**

The first paradox concerns the official opinion which is very much in favor of decentralization whereas at the same time local government is hardly developed. This is maybe one of the greatest paradoxes, as to many people decentralization seems hardly appropriate in a time of national construction. Often it also happens that the more proclamations and legal texts affirm their autonomy, the more these local communities are submitted, even juridically, to a centralized state system. Yet Africa seems at first sight a suitable continent for decentralization, as it is composed of a great number of entities and groups that have kept their original structure and did not yet go over in formal administrative structures.

Another paradox is the enormous accumulation of tasks given to these communities that are innately too weak to take up even the most classic and elementary administrative tasks. This accumulation makes solving the existing problems even more difficult, if not impossible. One example can illustrate this point: usually one looks for an adequate basic community that must be both modern enough to do away with the traditional institutions considered incompatible with the idea of progress, and close enough to the traditional structures to be understood by these populations. Also such a community must be decentralized enough to allow the people

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to take charge of it, but at the same time the state must be able to control it, in order to make sure the system works coherently and its projects are executed. In short, the local community must be small enough to mobilize the people and large enough to give the structure a minimum of economic means and to make investments pay.

Even more contradictory is the fact that one sees in the local government system, which has long been in a crisis because of the existence of the state, the solution for this same crisis, which affects the state in its different aspects of state-nation, central state and interventionist state.

## II. A Reality Difficult to Grasp

Still, these paradoxes and contradictions do not exclude each other. They are just part of the real situation. Yet it is convenient to define the limits and significance of that reality.

The diversity of these contradictory analyses and opinions is in the first place a result of the diversity of Africa. It is unnecessary to go into detail over this characteristic which makes a global approach and generalization of the African continent or even Sub-Saharan Africa uncertain. The restriction of our field of study to the former French colonial states does not eliminate approximations and errors. But from our point of view it reduces them significantly: this group of states presents itself as a sort of unity as it is composed of states that have a legal system of common inspiration and a society with a particularly strong and intrusive public order system. However, we do not underestimate the specific situation of each state and we also do not infer from the relative homogeneity of the area and from the similar approach to these phenomena of public administration that the mentioned problems and the adopted measures have no equivalent in other parts of Africa or even the rest of the world. We only want to present solutions which have been adopted by a number of countries that are the same in their legal and political-administrative tradition, which has an impact on society that should not be neglected.

Another difficulty and source for confusion is that quite some vagueness surrounds the subject of decentralization. It is indeed a topic that has an ideological connotation: local government is a politically relevant issue for the state. It is no coincidence that local communities are among the public institutions most sensitive to changes of governments or regime. Moreover, decentralization has been analyzed by many people, including scientists who base their findings largely on presuppositions and a priori concepts. Leaders of governments, experts and ideologists think of decentralization in terms of ideal models invented elsewhere and with an

idealistic or utopian contents: by way of example we can refer to the populist model of democratic self-government without limits or constraints or to the traditional communities of the golden era - allegedly the only period in which local experiments were not condemned. We will also see how far decentralization, already underdeveloped, is even more devaluated by a doctrine and by people that use reference criteria out of reach with reality. These maximalists evidently also have political reflections in mind. Their models are often also based on the conviction, which is not always explicit, that Africans have a kind of social ideal that makes them naturally apt for decentralization. In their eyes the only thing to do is to determine adequate structures, something the central government is not able to do or does not want to. Beyond any doubt however, the reality is different.

Another problem is that it is not always easy to analyze and identify the local community itself, in the first place because of the confusion of the different levels of investigation on the subject. Quite a number of paradoxes arise because one does not want to make a distinction between the official reading, what is written about it and the real situation. In the second place, reality is not very accessible. Because of the lack of detailed studies and anthropological administrative research the legal and institutional approach has more limits than elsewhere. Also there is no precise and universally accepted definition of decentralization. We define it as a system where autonomous units with legal capacity are responsible for the execution of certain administrative tasks, which are the responsibility of public authorities, under the control of a central authority.

Yet apart from all polemics and discussions, one general fact prevails, that of the underdevelopment of the decentralized communities. When they were officially proclaimed, it meant they were planned and promised for the future. Now most of the time they are, according to F.P. Gonidee, only "empty shells." Therefore for most authors decentralization is a *fata morgana*, a myth.

However, the foregoing does not take into account all of reality. The situation in Africa is not so evident and fixed. The territorial and local governments do not have a definitive outlook yet. On the contrary, the facts that we have found are still fragile and the interpretations must be read with caution and are subject to discussion; still some evolution is noticeable. Just as numerous political writers wonder if there is a chance that another political system will develop in Africa because there are some early indications for that, we also wonder sometimes, on the basis of the same indications, whether decentralization will not have a chance in Africa too.

### III. A More Favorable Context for Decentralization

A first and most visible sign is that decentralization is more thoroughly studied in Africa. Decentralization is not new in the heads of the authorities: it goes back to colonial days. But after a brief popularity at the time of independence, it was put away. The reform of local and regional government was not among the priorities of the new states. Whenever there were laws and regulations on the subject, they were not applied and the structures installed were later simply abolished or ignored by the state institutions (*cf.* the significant example of the Ivory Coast where the local councils were not renewed) or gradually deprived of their budget (*cf.* the appointment of council members and the budgetary powers of the councils). This decay of the decentralization idea contrasts with the local development programs that flourished in the following years. Later came the Arusha Declaration in Tanzania which symbolically started a movement which is still growing at the present time. The list of reforms of the system of local communities speaks for the active interest of state authorities in this matter. There are few states that are not mentioned in this list: Upper-Volta, 1973, 1974; Burkina Faso, 1984; Mali, 1977, 1978; Ivory Coast, 1980; Cameroon, 1975, 1987; Central African Republic, 1976; Senegal, 1972; Zaire, 1977, 1978, 1982, 1986; Burundi, 1977; Congo, 1973; Benin, 1974, 1977; Madagascar, 1973, 1975; Togo, 1981; Mauritania, 1986.

These reforms are not equally important and they vary much in their effect. Nonetheless, it remains an essential renewal of the official policy of the African nations in terms of territorial government. Various trends can be noticed in these reforms:

- *The decentralized government system is extended to the entire territory.* It is a new situation because up to the time of the Arusha Declaration, in most former French colonial states local government and specifically the powers of the municipalities were reserved to the cities, sometimes even only the most important ones. The rural areas were governed directly by the central authorities and its deconcentrated agents. This did not exclude the creation of cooperatives of community groups for agricultural development.

This extension shows in various forms and is unequally realized in practice. It is done cautiously in Mauritania (Ordinance 86134 of 17 August 1986) or in the Ivory Coast where a municipal system has been progressively adopted. In the latter state, after the law of 17 October 1980, the number of municipalities has risen from 37 to 136, plus the city of Abidjan. According to some studies the number of 400 communities

can be reached between 1990 and the year 2000. It is sometimes done immediately in countries with socialist and revolutionary governments that, as one of their first actions, establish a new local organization over the entire territory of the state. This happened in Madagascar in 1973, but it must be mentioned that this country had already been divided in municipalities since its independence. It also happened in Congo, in Benin, in Burkina Faso and elsewhere.

In the same way intermediate structures were added to the organic structures of local and territorial governments as a link between the basic communities and the state.

- *The communities are valorized.* Various states have constitutionalized their system of local communities. The latter now become an essential organ of the state. This is particularly true for socialist and revolutionary states such as Benin and Madagascar. The change is juridically important and breaks with the French tradition which saw the local communities only as administrative institutions without a political function.

- *The local communities' powers are enlarged.* They have full powers as few European local authorities ever had. This is especially true for socialist and revolutionary states where the basic communities have "revolutionary power" and their institutions are supreme authorities of the state power in that district. The local revolutionary institutions have all powers in administrative, legal, judicial and political matters (as for example in Benin, Congo, Madagascar, and in Sékou Touré's Guinea).

- *The system of elections is generalized* as the way to appoint local leaders and sometimes also, but less frequently, the provincial and regional authorities.

#### IV. New Functions for Local Communities

In view of past experience one can be skeptical about the seriousness of this trend and the chances that it will be realized. Yet the systematic and repeated proposals for decentralization are not only a ritual of political tactics. They must also have an influence on the attitude of the population and on the practice of the leaders that govern the country. They indicate that the public authorities have a more favorable perception of the local communities.

As was shown, the idea of decentralization in Africa initially met the refusal and indifference of its leaders. The construction of an administration seemed secondary to other priorities such as establishing order, unity and authority in a newly independent state. However, these arguments or justifications no longer serve: either the context has changed and part of

the priorities set by the leaders of that time have now been realized; or the central government has changed its point of view on the system of local government, which does not necessarily put the central government at risk, and has discovered the use of decentralization as a working instrument long known by specialists in the science of administration.

Whereas for a long time it was seen as a method of secondary administrative organization which could only be established once national unity and power was secure, decentralization is now considered as a way of stabilizing power and as a political regulator. It favors the penetration of an administration and it extends modern bureaucracy. Local autonomy does not always produce centrifugal powers, it can help to resolve negative effects of a policy that is too uniform or tending to uniformity, that is not adapted to the local particularities and that is not well received by the local people. As for the risk of stimulating and reinforcing local particularisms as the critics of the system claim, two remarks can be made. On the one hand, although it has been long denied by politics and law, the ethnic factor is gradually recognized as an element of public life (a good example of that is the official comment on the composition of the authorities in Cameroon or in the Ivory Coast). On the other hand, decentralization in Africa concerns the lower levels of society where ethnic solidarities and revendications certainly exist but where they are of no danger to the state. Decentralization does not affect the regional structure or, if it does so, it is exceptional (as for example in Madagascar with its six *faritany* replacing the provinces), and in that case the decentralized organs are strongly subordinated to the central government. In Congo and Benin for example the local leaders are appointed by the central authorities of the state or the party. The compartmentalization of the administrative map of many states as shown by the existence of numerous counties and municipalities in the Ivory Coast, proves that mainly micro-ethnic communities are created by decentralization reforms.

- Decentralization is also a *way to resolve the tensions coming from an extension or a renewal of the circle of elites*. It is not wrong to state that decentralization will be better accepted on the national level when there are social links of the central government to control this process. It seems that decentralization has a better chance when there is a local elite that is integrated in the modern system and that is as modernist as the national elite. (Remember that one of the arguments which explains the weakness of a centralized model in the aftermath of independence is that the center with its new modernist elites wanted to use the bureaucratic resources to construct the state, but that this was not the aim of the periphery.) The argument to refuse decentralization because these new

decision-making centers would be occupied by traditional authorities hostile to the central government, is still valid. But are these traditional authorities not more threatened by systematic decentralization than by legal governmental centralism which in effect leaves them their powers? It is also questionable that the chiefs and other institutions can still be a threat to the central political or administrative powers, as these local institutions are (as a result of acculturation) more or less integrated in the system of the administration, as they have assimilated its values and at the same time more or less kept their traditional relationships with the people. With the exception of the states with militancy as their doctrine, the leaders seem to adapt and take advantage of a system of local government that is certainly not sufficiently integrated in the system of public government and sometimes badly controlled, but that often has enough structure to solve the day-to-day problems and ensure a minimum of articulation between the state and civil society.

#### **V. Political Regimes More Favorable to Decentralization**

The evolution of African political regimes can be favorable to the development of local government structures: certain states tend to make their system of power more flexible and weaken the constraints of the central government. Political scientists see this as the beginning of an evolution which might lead to a new style of wielding political power closer to the democratic model. One phenomenon deserves our particular attention because it affects one of the most efficient basic principles of the administrative and political system, namely the electoral system with a plurality of candidates. This pluralism varies from country to country. It is fully present at all levels, even for presidential elections, in Senegal. It also exists, but in a different way, in Madagascar where there are competitive elections between political forces. In most other countries it is limited to the choice of a variety of candidates selected or agreed by the single party. Examples may be found in the Ivory Coast, in Togo, or even recently in Cameroon where in the local elections of 27 October 1987 and in the national elections of 24 April 1988 there were two lists of candidates proposed by the *Rassemblement Démocratique du Peuple* (The People's Democratic Party). In yet other countries the military — without partisan formations — can organize local elections in which in principle non-political lists of candidates compete with each other (for example in Mauritania where from 1986 to 1989 local elections were held for 45 city councils and 163 municipal councils). When organized on the local level these elections revive the local governmental network, and



stimulate and keep the decentralization process going. It is however a trend that is too new for its effects to be measured, but it can make local government less formal and help to build a real municipal system that does not put the state at risk. On the contrary, it works to its benefit.

#### **VI. Decentralization, Another Way of Withdrawal of the State**

It is probably right to say that one of the reasons for the decentralization process is the crisis of the state in Africa. We do not have to repeat the difficulties that African states encounter today: these problems are a result of the growing disproportion between the large number of tasks which the state has assigned itself and the ever-growing scarcity of resources, particularly financial means, it can dispose of. It is widely known that the central authorities have had to give up their priorities and a certain number of tasks by their own decision or forced by their creditors. It mainly shows in the privatization of public enterprises. This subject must be discussed with caution and one must determine how far it goes, because privatization policies dismantling the state's structure are not uncommon. By the means of transfer of powers, decentralization can be used as a yet another manner to lighten the administrative burden of the state and reach priority objectives that cannot be reached by the public services of the state (for example self-sufficiency in food). The link between privatization and decentralization is not coincidental. The sympathy for one or the other, varying in degree, can only be explained by the existence of relations generally linked to the central political and administrative system of both local leaders and private entrepreneurs. In these conditions the question for the African states is no longer whether they will admit or encourage local government. For varying reasons everybody agrees that it is a bare necessity, but the problem then is to define the modalities of organizing local government. In future will be the problem that, before they are fully developed, local governments will have to avoid being contaminated by the same diseases that caused the state's crisis.

The chances for success of the decentralization process seem rather slim to the observers because of the few new ideas on the subject. The permanent limits to the development of autonomous local communities are known and there are now even more obstacles on that road as a result of the decentralization movement of the last few years. However, the perspective of a local administrative network which is effective and efficient is less bleak if one takes a pragmatic and most of all modest approach of the subject of local government. Then much criticism and failure can be relativized.

## VII. The Temptation of Centralization Still Persists

Among the dangers that threaten decentralization there is a permanent one, namely the hesitation of the leaders governing the country. Whatever the official position or its evolution, the public authorities still have the traditional reflex of centralization. When the central authorities trust the local elites or leaders, it does not necessarily mean they also trust the local community as an autonomous unit.

In all hypothetical models local development depends strongly on the central authorities; that is a constant fact in Africa. While the phenomenon is not limited to this continent, in Africa this dependence is far greater than elsewhere. It clearly shows in the control mechanisms (technical, administrative and financial controls, democratic centralism, the single party, etc.) and in the powers of the local authorities. In the former French colonial states the model of centralism still prevails, whatever powers the local communities have. Moreover, the existence of local communities is seen in terms of a strong dependence on the objectives of the state: thus the autonomy of the local revolutionary governments can only be understood in the light of the objectives which were set and are being realized by the central government. On the whole, unlike what has happened in Europe, particularly in the United Kingdom, decentralization and local autonomy are not the outcome of a relationship of power and of a number of conflicts in this matter between the state and the local communities corresponding to local or regional solidarities that existed at that time or even before. In French-speaking Sub-Saharan Africa the traditional communities that form the social texture of society have not been able to exert influence or pressure on the state. Until recently these local solidarities and traditional power centers were not recognized as such and were even combated or annihilated. And if they were officially integrated in the governmental organization, as was done with the clans, then it was the result of the will of the central authorities. Generally then they did the same as the French revolutionaries who created the French "départements" (counties) on the national territory *ex nihilo*; and yet they have become efficient organizations for administrative decentralization. For the sake of truth, however, one must add that the attitude of the public authorities is no longer as systematically hostile to the creation of local communities as before. And although there is still a strong dependence on the state, this dependence varies from state to state and does not make the proper functioning of decentralized institutions impossible.

### VIII. How Deeply is Local Government Rooted in the People?

Another insufficiency seen by many people as a handicap that can become acute is that the administrative structures are not deeply rooted in the people. The articulation of the administration and the local communities has been a problem for the public authorities since early colonial days. At that time the problem was mainly situated in the basic administrative organization of the rural areas.

There have been numerous explanations suggested for this fact, some of which were incorrect. One is the distrust or even hostility of the people to the structures which are seen as direct links to the central authority, and which develop inconveniences such as a bureaucracy and its dysfunctions (corruption, abuse of power), and which leave no room for escape because these local structures are very close to the individual. Another explanation is the extraneousness of the governmental models. Whatever their inspiration may have been, the French law or the law of the socialist countries, these local administrations seem alien to the workings of civil society and their mechanisms are not properly understood by the people. Local institutions have simply too many elements of formalism and lack direct contact with the social groups they are supposed to govern.

Attempts have been made to solve this problem of articulation of public administration and population by integrating the traditional administrative networks in the new local administrative structures (*cf.* the policy with regard to clans). Sometimes, but less frequently, the reverse movement was attempted, by integrating the new government system structurally and functionally in the traditional institutions and by copying the administrative and juridical mechanisms from those of civil society. Yet these experiments are rare and when put into practice they did not last very long because of the logic of the state construction and because the idea of national integration has prevailed over the idea of political integration. The example of the *fokonolona* in Madagascar between 1973-1975 is particularly significant of this culturalistic approach and it reveals also its problems and limits. In this project the government wanted to recognize the power of the people up to the national level and give priority to the communities instead of the state. Therefore the reforms after the fall of the Tsiranana government aimed at establishing structures that reproduced or pretended to reproduce the decision-making mechanisms of the government of the ancestors (*fokonolona*). They also set forward the (for a lawyer rather surprising) principle of free creation of the *fokonolona* and of a system of communities that emanates from it. Finally the official texts contained the principle of direct democracy which would be put into

practice in the village communities. This system of self-government in populist style was, however, rapidly abandoned even if the appearances were kept up. On the basis of the results of the first years of practice the new leaders of the Republic of Madagascar refused to wager on the dynamics of the rural areas and on the revolutionary virtues of autonomy.

These characteristics are still present and they indicate the limits of decentralization experiments and of the new views on the subject. But some remarks can be made to the somewhat Manichean view of this phenomenon which favors in principle the approach of Africa "from below."

The lack of interest for local communities is not as uniform as it seems: if the people hardly see anything of the mechanisms of administrative decentralization, this is maybe not true for the local elites and leaders. One can blame Africa for this "usurpation of local power," but one must also see that in most states of the world the local government or the decentralized administration obeys the logic of representative government and only rarely the logic of direct democracy or spontaneous participation of the people.

Also one must bear in mind the reality of what the government has in mind because, although one can disagree with its position, it is there and one has to take it into account as it is. As said before, the primary goal is to create new administrative structures that correspond to the objective of keeping public order and, if that is realized, of stimulating development. These governmental structures can be based on local, social and regional solidarities but official recognition of these groups is not the most important point. The most relevant is that the new structures that are part of the modern world have to be the framework through which power is wielded with the aim that they will progressively be "inhabited," animated by the citizens; it is striking to see that most of the states, whether they are socialist or revolutionary or not, have resolutely taken this very modern "approach" to their local government, which is certainly the right way after thirty years of state construction, bureaucratic acculturation and reading and writing programs. This is the policy advocated in the Ivory Coast, after it had already been launched in Congo and Benin.

Finally, it must be said that the inefficiency of the local government is not as general as it seems: its acceptance varies, depending on the country, its history, its local communities and its type of settlement. Moreover, whatever the distance between the public authorities and the local community, the administrative penetration only goes with a diffusion of bureaucratic ideas in the social body. These mechanisms of the central

government are maybe not used for their original objective or according to their definition (e.g., tax collection and the organization of elections) but they are still a structural element in civil society, which is less opposed to and not so far away from the state system as it sometimes looks. There is even some "overefficiency" of the decentralized government, when elected representatives and local people, the two cornerstones of autonomy widely voiced by public opinion, make full use of their powers even beyond the legal limits. Again, a characteristic example is offered by a minority of *fokonola* in Madagascar, where people have effectively taken charge of local affairs. There have been expressions of spontaneous direct democracy, in the face of which local elected officials (Executive Committee, Chairman of the Committee) have become mere mouthpieces or spectators. This self-administration is unordered and does not always respect the framework defined by legal texts. Particularly in matters of public order and the movement of goods and persons, infringements on the competence of the state are frequent.

### **IX. Informal Administrative Networks: Competition or Complementarity?**

Another difficulty arises from the existence and increase of informal administrative networks. This is by no means a new problem. It has been admitted for quite some time that groups at the local level regulate their daily lives more or less outside official bureaucratic structures. While in some respects this phenomenon tends to diminish (because of administrative penetration in rural areas), in others it might be on the increase. The reasons are manifold. The first is the almost exclusive role played by local elites in the decentralized system, thus by and large excluding the rest of the population. The second reason is that the local entities do not enjoy sufficient means for their tasks, particularly that of providing essential public services, even if the official and sociological environment is favorable. Finally there is the emergence of new categories of people to be administered. The informal administration has long been limited to rural sectors, because the local and territorial administration was set up in or at least for the cities. More and more the governmental informalization reaches the suburbs and the major cities which have grown enormously both as a result of the demographic explosion and the rural exodus.

The development of an informal administration is considered a failure of the existing system. From a legal viewpoint that is a clear fact. But the judgment can also be less negative when we start from the idea that

the formal mechanisms and the informal network do not necessarily have the same functions and do not satisfy the same needs. What is called the failure of the local government system (but it can also be transferred to the failure of the central government system) refers to the claim that the public authorities should fulfill all the functions of management and control of the whole social field.

### **X. The Risks of the “Inflationary Democracy”**

There is still a last problem that is probably the most serious and difficult to solve because it will even aggravate as decentralization develops and is put into practice. It is the insufficiency of the financial means of the local communities. It is always difficult to assess this lack of funds, which is inherent to any system of decentralized government. But the lack is evidently greater in third-world countries, which are confronted with a shortage of funds at all levels; local public spending is very much neglected and none of the local communities can dispose of its entire budget. Sometimes resources are transferred but only to a limited extent, while the government cannot always fulfill its promise to transfer because of the declining economy (*cf.* the example of the Ivory Coast). Nowadays that problem is even more dramatic for two reasons: on the one hand there are ever more expectations and demands of the people according to the model of “inflationary democracy” (a term of J.C. Scott), because of the development of decentralization and greater freedom in the game of politics; on the other hand the local communities will have to offer fundamental public services which up to now have been provided by the central state (e.g., education, health care, etc.). In these conditions decentralization can degenerate into an obligation for the local communities to provide services that the central government cannot give. In this way decentralization can aggravate and stimulate “disadministration” of the national territory.

Speaking in general terms, are the rural zones with local autonomy not more threatened by a return to autocracy? In a time when the theme of disengagement of the public administration is successful, it is not always easy to ask oneself whether this retreat of the state is appropriate. However, the question must be answered. Regardless of its numerous errors, is the centralized state system not potentially the only one that can face the crucial problems of organizing atomized social groups with economic activities insufficiently articulated with each other? Certain experts think so. The conclusion may seem a paradox but the development of local autonomy is not without danger for the local communities themselves.

In conclusion, the future of decentralization seems to require a more modest approach to the local communities. One should be modest in the definition of their tasks and powers; modest in their role which is complementary and not exclusive as too many people in the state and in other informal circles think. It means another modesty, namely that of the lawyers, of the makers of governmental systems, of the theorists of African civil society. In this perspective the decentralization process is an enormous challenge, because the peaceful articulation between the public authorities and the numerous groups and solidarities of African society depends on it.

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