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 Review Article:

# Political Power in Africa

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*The Barrel of a Gun: Political Power in Africa and the Coup d'Etat.* by Ruth First. Allen Lane, The Penguin Press. £4.20. 513 pages.

Africa's stumbling progress to self realisation has been a cause of deep concern to all those who expected the successes of the anti-colonial struggle to lead on to rapid and fundamental change. These hopes have not been fulfilled and Ruth First sets out to find the reason. She centres her enquiry on the spate of military coups that have erupted over the continent and attempts to determine the conditions that led to them and in what directions these military governments have moved.

Her narrative is gripping and there is an immediacy about the presentation deriving from the vast amount of first hand research that went into the book. It is also a hard hitting book, in parts even harsh in its condemnation, as the journalist jostles the theorist off the pages, but it is bound to remain an indispensable though controversial source-book on Africa for some time to come. No one involved in Africa can afford to ignore this probing analysis which challenges many previously accepted formulae on the character and content of the African Revolution.

Arguing that army coups only occur as a last resort, in a condition of deep crisis, Ruth First declares her object to be to lay the basis for "a general theory of power for newly independent states which explains why they are so vulnerable to army intervention in politics", and to show "the way army interventions in politics reveal the nature of political power and its areas of failure in Africa."

There are two sets of causes for a coup, says Ruth First, the first lies in Africa's weakness in relation to external economic forces which make her highly vulnerable to international pressures, the second lies in the frailty of the new institutions set up in the independent African states. Most of the book is devoted to the second category which she examines from every possible angle using broad sociological generalisations as well as candid close-ups: for instance we see the army institutionally as a sector of the African elite and we are also shown its leading officers as personalities cast in a particular mould by the colonial process.

As may be anticipated from the way the purpose of the book is first formulated the author's view is

that army intervention in African politics has not been a useful exercise. With some few exceptions the army remains intact from pre-independence days and its values and traditions are still those imbibed at foreign training establishments. Since the army intervenes largely as an agency outside the newly created political system, and more importantly, without coherent policies of its own, this intervention is sterile. Problems which arise from social and economic causes and find expression in political tensions cannot be resolved by a superficial surgical operation at the top which is all the army can achieve. Inevitably the old tensions and conflicts soon return since their origin lay in fundamental difficulties of a kind which cannot be overcome without thoroughgoing politically-motivated change.

### Only an Uneasy Stability

Soon enough, the army comes to recognise its inability to do more than merely hold the ring, and it has to be content with maintaining an uneasy stability that solves little. At the same time, since the army cannot rule without a base, it tends to depend on the existing civil service which is more often than not conservative in outlook and elitist in character. It is by itself incapable of introducing such new measures as will solve the crisis which brought the army to power in the first place.

Furthermore, since the initial crisis arose out of the inability of the government to bring about the progress promised at independence, the army, which is neither familiar with the techniques of popular mobilisation nor able to formulate policies for this purpose, concentrates on administrative measures and reforms which cannot get to the root of things. The coup is therefore seen as a holding operation, with the army unwilling or incapable of releasing the springs of popular participation which can alone bring backward economies into motion.

Ruth First flails the army leaders and their civil counterparts in the elite with some pretty hard judgements. She details vast evidence of acquisitiveness and selfishness and describes with a wealth of supporting material the competitiveness and rivalry between the different sectors for the plums of office.

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The elite emerges from her description as a reactionary force, holding Africa to ransom, inhibiting the political development of the masses and damning Africa to perpetual internecine strife. While not doubting the evidence presented to us one is nevertheless bound to ask whether the picture conjured up is adequate and the analysis sufficiently helpful. That there have been devastating setbacks in Africa is common cause, but is it correct to infer from them that the objective conditions were hopeless from the start? Or that one can dismiss so categorically the political forces which rallied Africa in the early sixties? And has the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist dynamic been wholly spent? Ruth First says, "But taking the continent as a whole, the independence 'revolution' in Africa was brief, makeshift and leaky. It came precipitated as much if not more by thrusts from beyond the continent as by sustained and articulated social revolution from within." And she accepts Fanon's depiction of the process of "false decolonisation" as a largely phoney transfer of power to a Black administration. There was a great deal of sleight of hand in the process of the transfer of formal political power but what is now better understood is why this was accepted even by African radicals. Fundamentally their acquiescence lay in their fear that they had no alternative, and their hope that in time political independence would bring economic development and hence total independence. But this was not to be and as the decade wore on their frustration became subordinate to acceptance. Dependence remains the overall condition of most of Africa holding back progress everywhere.

But present day setbacks ought not to obliterate from our memories the very real anti-colonial movements of the early sixties, and the anti-imperialist element in African politics is far from dead. Even in some of the elitist sectors there is a political potential for renewed struggle against imperialism, when a force capable of giving it voice emerges once again. Recognition that the African Revolution has aborted is widespread and what is now underway is an evaluation of what went wrong and how it can be rectified. Perhaps the political articulation of the next stage will take time, and the blurred edges of class stratification in Africa makes it difficult to see in what form it will emerge, but that the resurgence of political action will embrace a wide spectrum of

social forces seems most likely. And it is my guess that the working class which is so often dismissed as a "labour aristocracy" but which is really both insecure and impoverished will play an important part in the process of resurgence as the internal antagonisms sharpen. Will there be intellectuals and other petty bourgeois elements to support a new radical political initiative? Miss First's analysis would tend to a negative answer since her condemnation of these groupings is almost total. This reviewer however has his doubts on this score and feels that she is forcing a blanket theory of group interest on to what remains an extremely volatile and unstable scene.

Even if we were now to accept that the African Revolution did not have the sweep we once attributed to it, it nevertheless gave rise to high expectations throughout the continent. Since these expectations were only satisfied for a tiny minority, contradictions remain even among the elite. This aspect might have emerged more sharply if the book had dealt more fully with the questions touched on so lightly in the last few pages. Ruth First says: "This book has concentrated on the shape of power inside Africa; not, on the power over Africa exercised by investment capital, credit, trade and diplomacy. That is another book, and a required companion to this one." We await this other book with eagerness, but perhaps it will not be out of place to suggest that some of that analysis properly belongs as a foundation in this one. We might also be left at the end of the book with a detestation of the methods of imperialism rather than a feeling of helplessness for being victims of our own self-deception.

These comments are not meant to condemn what is an important book by an author who has dared to question our most accepted formulae on Africa. Not least of its merits is that it draws the moral that one of the tests of a revolution is the extent of mass involvement.

For the African liberation movements the message is unambiguous—the way the struggle for liberation is conducted and the degree of mass participation is of crucial importance in determining the nature of the outcome. The best guarantee of real and fundamental change lies in the creation in the process of struggle of such democratic political institutions as will open the springs of mass involvement. Here, at least, lies a profoundly positive message, and one which lies within our own realisation.