



JULIUS K. NYERERE *One-Party Government*

JULIUS K. NYERERE (1922–1999) was a leader of a former colony in East Africa and one of the most prominent leaders in Africa in the latter part of the 20th century. He was born in a small village and followed the traditional path of opportunity to go to a local school. From there, he went to a boarding school and became the first Tanganyikan to attend a university. He eventually earned his master's degree from the University of London and returned to Tanganyika to become a teacher. He worked as Mwalimu (*teacher* in Swahili) Nyerere for many years. He also helped create the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) and became its leader in 1954. He led Tanganyika—which had been a German colony during World War I and was a British protectorate when it became an independent nation. He achieved his goal of independence for Tanganyika gained self-governance from the United Kingdom and became the nation's first president. The country was renamed Tanzania in 1964 when it merged with Zanzibar, a group of islands off the east coast of Tanzania. Nyerere governed for a little more than 20 years, during which he introduced governing principles on *Ujamaa*, the Swahili word for "family." *Ujamaa* also came to stand for socialism as a guiding principle while in office. When he stepped down in 1985, he left his government without a struggle, a rare feat in Africa at that time. Yet his experiment was not entirely successful: the economy and infrastructure were in shambles when Nyerere left office. He did not regret his decision to rely on socialism, however, because that socialism was essential to help the country achieve a new independence and the concept of

From *Transition* 2 (1961).

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JULIUS K. NYERERE (1922–1999) was one of the first presidents of a former colony in East Africa and also one of the most respected leaders in Africa in the latter part of the twentieth century. Nyerere was born in a small village and followed village life until he had the opportunity to go to a local school. From there, he progressed rapidly and became the first Tanganyikan to attend a British university. He eventually earned his master's degree from Edinburgh University and returned to Tanganyika to become a teacher. He was often referred to as Mwalimu (*teacher* in Swahili) Nyerere, even after he stopped teaching. He also helped create the Tanganyika African National Union (TANU) and became its leader in 1954, working toward making Tanganyika—which had been a German colony before World War I and was a British protectorate when the TANU was formed—an independent nation. He achieved his goal beginning in 1961 when Tanganyika gained self-governance from Britain, after which Nyerere became the nation's first president. The country's name was changed to Tanzania in 1964 when it merged with the archipelago of Zanzibar, a group of islands off the east coast of Tanganyika.

Nyerere governed for a little more than twenty years, basing his governing principles on *Ujamaa*, the Swahili term for familyhood. *Ujamaa* also came to stand for socialism, which was his governing principle while in office. When he stepped down in 1985, he turned over his government without a struggle, which was unusual in Africa at that time. Yet his experiment with socialism was not successful: the economy and infrastructure of Tanzania was described as being in shambles when Nyerere left office. But Nyerere did not regret his decision to rely on socialist ideals because he felt that socialism was essential to help the poor orient themselves to a new independence and the concept of nationalism. When he took

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office, the nation had over 120 tribes scattered across the country. Creating a sense of unity was chief among his goals.

Nyerere commented about socialism and his refusal to consider it a total failure during a PBS interview in 1996. He said that socialism is people centered and more likely to help the poor. Capitalism, he said, was ruthless and unlikely to promote justice and freedom in a country in its infancy, like Tanzania was. His principles were designed to bring an undeveloped country into the modern world, and without a history of self-sufficiency or a sense of nationhood, Tanzania faced a challenge that Nyerere felt was unique and unlike anything that the developed world, especially Europe, would understand. He created what he called "African socialism," which aimed to solve the problem of poverty and which he felt was central to ushering his nation into the modern world.

Like Benazir Bhutto (p. 177), Nyerere complained that the interests of the West in Africa were not always those that benefited the African people. The Cold War caused the West to back political figures who were often despotic. But even more important, he felt, was the fact that the original colonial powers had created the borders of African nations in a manner that ignored the ethnic makeup of regions, which led to some very unfortunate catastrophes. Ethnic fighting between Hutus and Tutsis in neighboring Rwanda and Uganda killed thousands in 1994 and sent more than a million people into neighboring nations. Nyerere tried to help negotiate between the two groups, but he also demanded that Western powers intervene to prevent the wholesale slaughter of either group. He complained bitterly that there was no help sent from the West.

Nyerere is notable for having left his office to a constitutionally elected successor, although he remained at the head of the party he created. He is also notable for having translated a number of Shakespeare's plays into Swahili and for having written several books discussing the possibilities for democracy in modern Africa. Unlike other African leaders, many of whom were corrupt and lived in opulence, Nyerere was never charged with corruption and left office still a very modest man. He was voted a pension, which sustained him in his later years.

Nyerere's Rhetoric

Nyerere's prose is graceful and clear. He was a natural writer and in this selection establishes an argument in favor of what he felt was a reasonable version of democracy. His primary rhetorical technique is comparison, balancing the Western view that democracy must

have a dialogic structure—with two sides in order to produce a synthesis that satisfies both—the African view that political parties should be based on consensus. References to authority bolster his argument, likening African ideas of democracy to the Greek sense of democracy that did not have the parliamentary structure of modern Europe. Europeans see democracy as a form of self-government.

As he establishes his comparison, he also employs the technique of the Greek sense of democracy as "the rule of the equals" (para. 1), after which he uses the term "consensus" as a version of democracy as "[t]he elders talk[ing] until they agree" (para. 2). This is the concept of African democracy. He then discusses the circumstances of European government and Western concepts of democracy. He then offers another definition: "the rule of the equals" (para. 3). These definitions and distinctions support his thesis. His thesis is that one-party government is the best support for his thesis lies in large measure in the fact that democracy in such a way so as to eliminate the need for general agreement among the people on the issues. He explains that in the past, "the society was a society of equals" (para. 4). "The rule of the equals agree on something, that consensus" (para. 5).

Such an argument demands a quick to establish that he is not arguing for a system that is not democratic" (para. 6). Rather, he argues for a form of democracy. He then goes on to compare the situation with an interesting hypothetical example: "If Britain were to win all the seats and the other party, that party would still consider the situation as a result of some Western nations, such results would be a disaster and the country's government would be in a state of emergency" (para. 7).

As a way of making his position clear, he refers to the early Anglo-Saxon tradition, established in the 11th century as a result of satisfying the needs of the people. Considering the Aristotelian view of the rich and the poor and that several people have wealth and the lack of it, this argument is that political parties established to represent the people's wealth. One party wishes to concentrate the wealth, while the other wishes to distribute it; thus, the p

The point Nyerere makes is again comparative: in Africa, as opposed to Europe, the people are uniformly impoverished, so there is no basis for a two-party system.

Ending his discussion of the forms of democracy, he points out that in times of emergency in Western democracies, "opposition parties sink their differences and join together" (para. 12), and his point is that "[t]his is our time of emergency" and in a time of emergency, "[t]here can be no room for difference or division" (para. 11). He underscores the import of both statements by using italics.

The remainder of his discussion treats what he calls the essentials of democracy, or "the freedom and the well-being of the individual" (para. 14). He maintains his emphasis on the individual as he considers the problems inherent in creating a nation that is emerging from colonialism and that is facing possibly "cynical" and "criminal" attempts by foreign governments to scuttle it. He restates his view that the creation of a new nation must be treated as a national emergency, "comparable almost to that of a country at war" (para. 20). However, he ends his essay by saying that there may come a time when "a genuine and responsible opposition" (para. 23) party may be appropriate for an African nation. He says that will depend on the will of the people.

PREREADING QUESTIONS: WHAT TO READ FOR

The following prereading questions may help you anticipate key issues in the discussion of Julius K. Nyerere's "One-Party Government." Keeping them in mind during your first reading should help focus your attention.

- What is the African democratic tradition?
- Why is the Western democratic tradition of two oppositional parties inappropriate for an African nation?
- What are the basic elements of democratic government?

One-Party Government

The African concept of democracy is similar to that of the ancient Greeks from whose language the word *democracy* originated. To the Greeks, democracy meant simply "government by discussion

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¹ Arthur Guy Blutton-Brock (1906-1995)
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among equals." The people discussed and when they reached agreement the result was a "people's decision."

Mr. Guy Blutton-Brock¹ writing about Nyasaland described traditional African democracy as: "The elders sit under the big tree and talk until they agree." This "talking until you agree" is the essential of the traditional African concept of democracy.

To minds molded by Western parliamentary tradition and Western concepts of democratic institutions, the idea of an organized opposition group has become so familiar, that its absence immediately raises the cry of "Dictatorship." It is no good telling them that when a group of 100 equals have sat and talked together until they agreed where to dig a well (and "until they agreed" implies that they will have produced many conflicting arguments before they did eventually agree), they have practiced democracy. Proponents of Western parliamentary traditions will consider whether the opposition was organized and therefore automatic, or whether it was spontaneous and therefore free. Only if it was automatic will they concede that here was democracy.

Basically democracy is government by discussion as opposed to government by force, and by discussion between the people or their chosen representatives as opposed to a hereditary clique. Under the tribal system whether there was a chief or not, African society was a society of equals, and it conducted its business by discussion.

It is true that this "pure" democracy—the totally unorganized "talking until you agree" can no longer be adequate; it is too clumsy a way of conducting the affairs of a large modern state. But the need to organize the "government by discussion" does not necessarily imply the need to organize an opposition group as part of the system.

I am not arguing that the two-party system is not democratic. I am only saying it is only one form which democracy happens to have taken in certain countries, and that it is by no means essential. I am sure that even my friends in the Labour Party or the Conservative Party in Britain would admit that if their party could succeed in winning all the seats, they would be perfectly happy to form a one-party government. They, the winning party that is, would not be likely to suspect themselves of having suddenly turned Britain into a dictatorship!

Some of us have been over-ready to swallow unquestioningly the proposition that you cannot have democracy unless you have

¹Arthur Guy Blutton-Brock (1906–1995) Farmer and missionary who founded nonracial communities in Rhodesia and other African nations. He was a friend of Nyerere and named a national hero of Zimbabwe after his death.

a second party to oppose the party in power. But, however difficult our friends in Britain and America may find it to accept what to them is a new idea—that democracy can exist where there is not formal opposition—I think we in Africa should think very carefully before we abandon our traditional attitude.

It is often overlooked that the Anglo-Saxon tradition of a two-party system is a reflection of the society in which it evolved. Within that society, there was a struggle between the “haves” and the “have-nots”—each of whom organized themselves into political parties, one party associated with wealth and the status quo and the other with the masses of the people and change. Thus the existence of distinct classes in a society and the struggle between them resulted in the growth of the two-party system. But need this be accepted as the essential and only pattern of democracy?

With rare exceptions the idea of class is something entirely foreign to Africa. Here, in this continent, the Nationalist Movements are fighting a battle for freedom from foreign domination, not from domination by any ruling class of our own. To us “the other Party” is the Colonial Power. In many parts of Africa this struggle has been won; in others it is still going on. But everywhere the people who fight the battle are not former overlords wanting to reestablish a lost authority, they are not a rich mercantile class whose freedom to exploit the masses is being limited by the colonial powers, they are the common people of Africa.

Thus once the foreign power—“the other party”—has been expelled there is no ready-made division, and it is by no means certain that democracy will adopt the same machinery and symbols as the Anglo-Saxon. Nor indeed is it necessarily desirable that it should do so.

New nations like Tanganyika are emerging into independence as a result of a struggle for freedom from colonialism. It is a patriotic struggle which leaves no room for differences, and which unites all elements in the country; and the Nationalist Movements—having united the people and led them to freedom—must inevitably form the first government of the new states. Once the first free government is formed, its supreme task lies ahead—the building up of the country's economy so as to raise the living standards of the people, the eradication of disease, and the banishment of ignorance and superstition. This, no less than the struggle against colonialism, calls for the maximum united effort by the whole country if it is to succeed. *There can be no room for difference or division.*

In Western democracies it is an accepted practice that in times of emergency opposition parties sink their differences and join

together in forming a national government, and until our war against poverty has been won—we should not let our unity follow somebody else's “book of rules.”

If these then are the forms of democracy

First, the freedom and the well-being of the people alone is not enough; there can be no freedom to starve. True freedom is freedom from bondage, from discrimination, and from all those things that have made life a burden. It is the responsibility of the government to lead the fight against all these enemies. The government, once freely elected, must act in the best interests of the people, and without delay, also the duty of the government to protect the country from irresponsible or vicious attacks. It, for without unity the fight against these enemies will not be won.

When, then, you have the freedom and well-being of the people who has the right freely and regularly to join in the government of his country; and when these things are conducted by free discussion, you have a true democracy.

True democracy depends far more on the form of government which respects and defends the individual than on the form which it takes. The form is useless without the content. In a form in which the form is an external expression of the content, with organized groups, this question of form is not enough to ask what attitude the government will adopt towards an opposition, whether an opposition will adopt towards the government.

In the past all that was required of a government was to maintain law and order within the country and to resist external aggression. Today the requirements, whether “communist” or “free,” are far more. Its requirements of money and of resources are such that a government today finds it easy to fulfill its requirements for the people.

These common problems of a modern government in a young and underdeveloped country are the common problems of the nationalist movements in raising the expectations of the people by means of communication which has brought the worker in almost daily contact

together in forming a national government. *This is our time of emergency, and until our war against poverty, ignorance, and disease has been won—we should not let our unity be destroyed by a desire to follow somebody else's "book of rules."*

If these then are the forms of democracy, what are the essentials? 13

First, the freedom and the well-being of the individual. Freedom alone is not enough; there can be a freedom which is merely the freedom to starve. True freedom must be freedom not only from bondage, from discrimination, and from indignity, but also freedom from all those things that hamper a people's progress. It is the responsibility of the government in a democratic country to lead the fight against all these enemies of freedom. To do this the government, once freely elected, must also be free to govern in the best interests of the people, and without fear of sabotage. It is, therefore, also the duty of the government to safeguard the unity of the country from irresponsible or vicious attempts to divide and weaken it, for without unity the fight against the enemies of freedom cannot be won. 14

When, then, you have the freedom and well-being of the individual; who has the right freely and regularly to join with his fellows in choosing the government of his country; and where the affairs of the country are conducted by free discussion, you have democracy.

True democracy depends far more on the attitude of mind 15 which respects and defends the individual than on the forms it takes. The form is useless without the attitude of the mind of which the form is an external expression. As with individuals, so with organized groups, this question of attitude is all-important. It is not enough to ask what attitude will an African government adopt towards an opposition, without also asking what attitude an opposition will adopt towards a popularly elected government.

In the past all that was required of government was merely 16 to maintain law and order within the country, and to protect it from external aggression. Today the responsibilities of governments, whether "communist" or "free," are infinitely wide. However nearly its requirements of money and men may be met, no government today finds it easy to fulfill all its responsibilities to the people.

These common problems of a modern state are no less formi- 17 dable in young and underdeveloped countries. The very success of the nationalist movements in raising the expectations of the people, the modern means of communication which put the American and the British worker in almost daily contact with the African worker,

the twentieth-century upsurge of the ordinary man and woman—all these deprive the new African governments of those advantages of time and ignorance which alleviated the growing pains of modern society for the governments of older countries.

We must listen to the demands of the common man in Africa, intensified as they are by the vivid contrast between his own lot and that of others in more developed countries, and the lack of means at the disposal of the African governments to meet these demands, the lack of men, the lack of money, above all the lack of time. To all this add the very nature of the new countries themselves. They are usually countries without natural unity. Their "boundaries" enclose those artificial units carved out of Africa by grabbing colonial powers without any consideration of ethnic groups or geographical realities, so that these countries now include within their borders tribal groups which, until the coining of the European Powers, have never been under one government. To those, in the case of East and Central Africa, you must add the new tribes from Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Here are divisions enough to pose a truly formidable task in nation building.

As if the natural challenge was not enough, with the raising of each new flag come the intrigues of the international diplomacy of rivalry and all that goes with it; the cynical and the criminal attempts by powerful foreign governments to weaken the unity of any country whose government pursues policies which they do not like. Who does not know that foreign nations have again and again poured in money to back up any stooge who will dance to their political tune? As their sole purpose is to confuse the people and weaken the legal government for their own ends, they are quite indifferent to the fact that their chosen puppets have no following at all in the country itself.

It should be obvious, then, why the governments of these new countries must treat the situation as one of national emergency, comparable almost to that of a country at war.

In the early days of nation building as in time of war the opposition, if any, must act even more responsibly than an opposition in a more developed and more stable, a more unified and a better equipped country in times of peace. Given such a responsible opposition I would be the first person to defend its right. But where is it? Too often the only voices to be heard in "opposition" are those of a few irresponsible individuals who exploit the very privileges of democracy—freedom of the press, freedom of association, freedom to criticize—in order to deflect the government from its responsibilities to the people by creating problems of law and order.

The admitted function of any political opposition is to try and persuade the electorate to reject the existing government at the

next election. This is "reasonable" opposition with a definite alternative proposal to believe; but that sort of mature opposition is rare in an independent state. Usually the opposition is motivated by self-interest rather than by sincerity, and is motivated more by that of self-aggrandizement. The opposition is often copied from the political language of the more developed to engage the sympathy of the uncritical masses. Nor are the tactics they use those of a mature opposition. In such circumstances the opposition is met promptly with the troublemakers. The opposition in these vital early years of its life, is a test of the degree of tolerance which may be expected in a young democracy.

This does not mean, however, that opposition cannot arise in time, and that it would be less welcome in Africa. For myself, as I have said, I would welcome it. But whether it does or does not, it is the duty of the people themselves and their leaders to create a climate of freedom of discussion and the equality of opinion to make democracy.

To those who wonder if democracy is possible in Africa, the answer then would be that far from impossible, it has long been familiar to the African mind. It is a traditional attitude to discussion, and it is this attitude to justify the claim that democracy is possible in Africa. The opposite: the principles of our traditional society, augmented as it were by our modern society, should augur well for democracy in Africa.

QUESTIONS FOR CLASS

1. In what sense are the ancient Greek ideas of democracy similar?
2. Is "discussing a governmental issue" a good definition of democracy?
3. Why does Nyerere take issue with the idea of democracy?
4. Does the question of the existence of a class in European and African democracies support Nyerere's views on class?

next election. This is "reasonable" in the case of a responsible opposition with a definite alternative policy in which its members sincerely believe; but that sort of mature opposition is rare indeed in a newly independent state. Usually the irresponsible individuals I have mentioned have neither sincerity, conviction, nor any policy at all save that of self-aggrandizement. They merely employ the catchphrases copied from the political language of older, stable countries, in order to engage the sympathy of the unthinking for their destructive tactics. Nor are the tactics they use those of a responsible democratic opposition. In such circumstances the government must deal firmly and promptly with the troublemakers. The country cannot afford, during these vital early years of its life, to treat such people with the same degree of tolerance which may be safely allowed in a long-established democracy.

This does not mean, however, that a genuine and responsible opposition cannot arise in time, nor that an opposition of that kind would be less welcome in Africa than it is in Europe or America. For myself, as I have said, I would be the first to defend its rights. But whether it does or does not arise depends entirely on the will of the people themselves and makes no difference at all to the freedom of discussion and the equality in freedom which together make democracy.

To those who wonder if democracy can survive in Africa my own answer then would be that far from it being an alien idea, democracy has long been familiar to the African. There is nothing in our traditional attitude to discussion, and current dedication to human rights, to justify the claim that democracy is in danger in Africa. I see exactly the opposite: the principles of our nationalist struggle for human dignity, augmented as it were by our traditional attitude to discussion, should augur well for democracy in Africa.

QUESTIONS FOR CRITICAL READING

1. In what sense are the ancient Greek and modern African understandings of democracy similar?
2. Is "discussing a governmental issue and coming to a satisfactory conclusion" a good definition of *democracy*?
3. Why does Nyerere take issue with the two-party system in African democracies?
4. Does the question of the existence of different social classes affect European and African democracies differently? Do you agree with Nyerere's views on class?