

In Africa, 50th anniversary of independence is an occasion to celebrate, lament

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YAOUNDE, CAMEROON -- Former U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan stepped up to the podium to speak about rule of law and human rights, Africa's hopes and obstacles.

Behind him, seated in a row of red velvet chairs, were the leaders of Cameroon, Gabon, the Central African Republic, Ivory Coast, Chad and the Republic of Congo. All had gained power through military coups, civil wars, inheritance or manipulated elections.

"It wasn't a group of the continent's biggest democrats," remarked Richard Moncrieff, West Africa project director for the International Crisis Group.

Over the past week, hundreds of dignitaries arrived in this Central African capital to celebrate 50 years of independence from colonial rule for Cameroon and 16 other African nations. But casting a shadow over the occasion was a sober acknowledgment that the actions of many of Africa's leaders were hurting the continent's image and potential, as well as tarnishing its successes.

On Sunday, Ethiopia -- a close U.S. ally -- will hold a national election that is expected to extend Prime Minister Meles Zenawi's 19-year rule. Meles was once viewed as a new breed of reformist African leader, and Ethiopia receives nearly a billion dollars a year in U.S. assistance.

But in the run-up to the vote, authorities have jailed political rivals and journalists, denied food aid to opposition supporters, and even killed opposition leaders, according to human rights activists and diplomats. Ethiopia has denied the allegations.

"There are still too many instances of corruption, of elite capture of resources, of growing inequality in work and opportunity, abuse of electoral processes and selective adherence to the rule of law," said Annan, who is from the African country Ghana.

The leaders behind him nodded.

U.S. and Western officials also once hailed Rwandan President Paul Kagame and Ugandan leader Yoweri Museveni as Africa's greatest hopes. But they, too, are accused of using repression to suppress dissent and extend their rule. Rwanda goes to the polls in August, but reports of a state crackdown on opposition parties and independent journalists are already surfacing.

"There is a very serious problem of winner-takes-all politics," Moncrieff said. "That means the stakes of presidential power are so high that people are willing to use violence to get it or abuse the rule of law to keep it."  
Africa vs. Asia

Many Africans lament their continent's slow progress in comparison to Asia. Africa is rich in oil, gas and minerals. Yet several Asian countries, which also gained independence from colonial rulers a half-century ago, are among the world's most advanced.

Annan noted that South Korea<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/countries/korea.html?nav=el>> and Sudan had the same per-capita income in the 1960s. South Korea is today one of the world's wealthiest countries and is "a respected member" of the international community, Annan said. Despite its oil wealth, Sudan is one of the poorest countries, and its president has been indicted by a war crimes tribunal.

"If Africa is put on the right track, it could be a major player," said Mohamed ElBaradei, the Nobel Peace Prize winner and former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, who is from Egypt<<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/world/countries/egypt.html?nav=el>>.

In the past two years, there have been military coups in Niger, Madagascar and Guinea. Sudan's first multi-party elections in more than two decades were marred by vote rigging, intimidation and boycotts.

Last week, Burundi ordered a Human Rights Watch researcher to leave the country. The group had documented official inaction over political violence in the run-up to its first presidential elections after nearly 16 years of civil war next month.

Rwanda, which receives hundreds of millions in U.S. and international aid each year, also recently ordered a Human Rights Watch monitor to leave the country.

There have been successes. Civil wars have declined since the 1990s. There are strong democracies, such as Ghana and South Africa. Nigeria has so far smoothly managed a political transition after the death of President Umar Yar'Adua this month.

The continent has one of the highest rates of cellphone growth. Investment from Asian nations such as China is booming, fueling relatively strong economic growth rates.

Still, even the most stable African economies can quickly disintegrate. Ivory Coast, once a model of stability, crumbled into civil war in 2002 and remains tense and divided. Kenya's 2007 election violence spurred investors to pull out or postpone investments for months.

Calculated repression

Demonstrations erupted after Ethiopia's 2005 elections, when opposition groups charged that the government had cheated them out of parliamentary seats. Security forces suppressed the protests, killing dozens and arresting thousands. This time, the state repression appears to be a calculated strategy to erase any serious political threat and to prevent a repeat of violence, said rights activists and diplomats.

The State Department's most recent human rights report concludes that Ethiopian "security forces committed arbitrary and politically motivated killings," and that "there were reports of politically motivated disappearances."

A recent Human Rights Watch report accused the government of politicizing the distribution of humanitarian assistance, much of it from the United States.

In a telephone interview, Ethiopian Communications Minister Bereket Simon denounced both reports as "baseless."

"We are implementing democracy based on the Ethiopian context. We are not taking any prescription from any master," he said. "This is a free and fair election. You will see how Ethiopians will give their approval for this government."

In Yaounde, none of the dignitaries who discussed Africa's future on panels or in speeches mentioned Meles. But the names of Tanzania's first president, Julius Nyerere, and South Africa's Nelson Mandela were still uttered with pride, as models to emulate.

As he concluded his speech, Annan described Africa as "a sleeping giant about to be awoken." He spoke of the potential markets, the rapid spread of modern technology. He said the continent's opportunities "are real, but also under threat."

He implored leaders to respect human rights, rule of law, to be more transparent. He urged those at the helm of oil-rich nations to use their wealth to help their people. Behind him, his host, President Paul Biya of Cameroon, nodded.

Biya has been in power for 28 years and wields tight control over the government and the economy. The watchdog group Transparency International describes Cameroon as among the world's most corrupt countries. There is no real political opposition.

His portrait is everywhere. His supporters wear shirts emblazoned with his face and burst into song in front of him. Banners on the street proclaim him "a wise man at the service of Africa."