

Democracy and Good Governance in P.B. Mayega's *'The People's Schoolmaster'*

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Abstract

This essay uses P.B. Mayega's *The People's Schoolmaster*, which exposes the true face of democracy in many African countries. The essay focuses on Mayega's fictional account because fiction in Africa tends to paint a more realistic picture about democracy in Africa. It is commonly accepted that democracy and good governance are necessary development tools, whether in a developed or developing country. Whereas there is ample evidence in the Western world to illustrate that this democratic principle does actually work when put into practice, in developing countries, especially in Africa, evidence on the ground demonstrates otherwise. Though many African countries profess and market themselves as democratic nations, they fail to implement democratic principles. The kind of democracy practiced in many African countries is largely symbolic and cosmetic and stifles rather than promote democratic principles.

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Introduction

The People's Schoolmaster is a contemporary novel written by an East African writer P. B. Mayega. The 2004 novel's central message revolves around governance and political management in Africa. Set in Kumwitu, a fictitious country, the novel like Chinua Achebe's more illustrious *Anthills of the Savannah*, the novel uses a fictitious country to represent actual events in an African country. Whereas Achebe's Kangan refers to Nigeria (although the events can refer to any country in Africa), events in this novel focus on Tanzania, in east Africa. The borders, names and events that appear in the novel indicate that Kumwitu, which literally means "our home country" stands for Tanzania, although it could also stand for many of the African countries going through more or less the same problems.

The People's Schoolmaster ridicules and satirises African political leaders who pretend to have accepted the Western-engineered economic and political reforms, instituted under the aegis of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other powerful external agencies while doing the exact opposite: weakening democracy. A part of the conditions that these African nation-states have accepted include implementing democratic principles in their countries which would in turn promote good governance, transparency and accountability. In reality, their resolve turns into disillusionment since no real democracy is allowed to develop. Mayega depicts the flouting of democratic principles by many African nation-states. His primary theme is that many African nation-states practice pseudo democracy aimed at promoting the interests of the ruling despots at the expense of the interests of the majority. Thus, any serious reader will note that Mayega joins eminent African writers such as Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Soyinka and Armah to use fiction to speak the truth about Africa and speak for social justice for the Tanzanian community in particular and Africa in general. Mayega's mission in this novel is clearly stated in the novel's foreword:

This is a voice in the wildness but a voice all the same. If I always speak the truth, WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT? God loves he who speaks the truth, for he is not endearing to people with mean hearts. For he who does not live by the truth is shunned even by weak-hearted friends. Should such bad omen beget me, I will not envy those who are able to sustain friendship. I cannot revoke the truth in fear of temporary loneliness, lest I be denied eternal communion that overshadows the sham of lies (Mayega, 2004, p.iii).

In short, Mayega's *The People's Schoolmaster* is an allegory for Tanzania, specifically critiquing the failure to promote true democracy in many African countries.

The People's Schoolmaster: a synopsis

The novel's primary agenda is to establish the truth against all odds. The Kumwitu government calls itself a people's and democratic government which follows democratic principles, and promotes checks and balances, accountability and the rule of law. This rhetoric is reminds one of the former communist bloc countries which had such labels. The novel exposes this sugar-coated bitter pill as a veil for leaders' self-aggrandizement at the expense of the people's aspirations. In Kumwitu, the leaders elected through a democratic vote do not focus on the interests and needs of the very people who voted them into power.

The People's Schoolmaster shows how these leaders have hijacked the process of privatization and globalisation in Kumwitu to enrich themselves through shady deals. These policies are supposed to bring about development for the people after years of socialist mismanagement, but the leaders implement these policies in a questionable manner. The leaders, for example, do not involve the poor majority. Instead, it is the few leaders who are the only beneficiaries of these initiatives. The novel thus presents these reforms as leader-centred, and not as people-centred as they should be. The novel endorses the struggle of the people against the abuse of power and personal enrichment in the name of privatization and globalisation, and instead pushes for a people-centred democratic and development process.

In the story, foreign investors have come to Kumwitu to invest. The government sees the investors as having come to improve and boost the economy of Kumwitu. However, the government allows Frederick de Witts, a Southern African investor, to build a beef processing plant near River Luzi, the only source of water for Kumwitu residents, and Kumwitu Primary School. Kumwitu residents also depend on the river for their livelihood as fishermen. This factory pollutes the river and fills the atmosphere of the school premises and residential areas with smog. The factory is poisonous to the people's health due to the failure to respect environmental guidelines. The novel presents this privatisation and liberalisation process as one undermining the very development the government seeks to promote. The culprits responsible for this irresponsible development are the government that lacks accountability to its people.

Democracy, Good Governance and *The People's Schoolmaster*

Tied to the primary theme of the novel is that the government of Kumwitu has failed to promote democracy and good governance for its people. Indeed, the spread of democracy and good governance in African, or Third World countries has been an inevitable consequence of many years of economic mismanagement under one party-rule and centralised socialist economic systems. Przeworski (1998) asserts that under the new global economy, authoritarian governments have been forced to embrace mostly Western-inspired democratic ideals and liberalised political and economic systems. Democracy is generally a system of accountable and representative government that affords citizens choices and participation in the way they are governed and relate to the distribution of power within the system and the ground rules governing this process (Rowen, 1995; Robinson and White, 1998). Under this Western conception, democracy and good governance are interconnected. The attributes of good governance include, people's participation, transparency, accountability and the rule of law. Santiso (2001, pp.165-166) adds:

Governance encompasses (i) the form of regime; (ii) the process by which authority is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources for development; (iii) the capacity of governments to design formulate and implement policies and discharge functions...Good governance system puts further requirements on the process of decision-making...It extends beyond the capacity of public sector management to the rules and institutions that create a legitimate, effective and efficient framework for the formulation and conduct of public policy. It applies managing public affairs in a transparent, accountable, participatory and equitable manner showing due regard for democratic principles.

Since the 1990s, the Breton Woods Institutions began to pressure Third World countries, including those in Africa, to open up their political systems and governance structures. Specifically, the international donor community argued that the social, political and economic problems many African countries faced were a result from the absence of functioning democracy (The Foundations of Democracy, Nd).

The novel, *The People's Schoolmaster*, represents a period after Kumwitu has embraced both political pluralism and economic liberalisation in line with the dictates of the Bretton Woods institutions and other Western donors. It represents a period where the rapid spread of democracy in Africa is accompanied by widespread disillusionment. Self-serving leaders have hijacked people-centred development for personal aggrandisement. They fail to implement the democratic principles they have vowed to protect under the new constitution. After realising that the processing plant benefits the few leaders at the expense of the poor majority, the people of Kumwitu demand the removal of Frederick de Witt's factory. However, when they approach their Members of Parliament (MPs), their representatives in the Legislature, they are disappointed to find that these inept MPs are incapable of solving the problem. Mageuzi (which literary means Revolution) tells the people:

The current Parliament cannot give us support. It is like a soap opera. It is simply a committee of the ruling party. When we were under one-party dictatorship, The Parliament used to question or even block bills that were deemed unacceptable. MPs used to block such bills by withdrawing the proverbial shilling from a Ministry's proposed budget. That doesn't happen anymore. I suppose,

only bank notes are being thrown around instead... MPs from the ruling party cannot question or hold the government to account for misappropriation and embezzlement of public funds for fear of being dubbed opponents. They are prepared to endorse bills that they jolly well know will have adverse effects on *wananchi*... (Mayega, 2004, pp. 15-16).

This passage demonstrates that Kumwitu has a sham Parliament. This Parliament, which is supposed to be one of the organs to help provide checks and balances in a democratic system, is not accountable to the people and betrays the spirit of liberal democracy. The novel suggests that the Kumwitu government is undemocratic. Moreover, the novel attacks the subordination and callous neglect of duty among the Members of Parliament. At no stage in the novel are the people of Kumwitu involved in the whole process of allowing an investment that would affect their lives. Neither do their MPs heed their pleas once the adverse effect of the plant is felt. Thus both the government and the MPs fail to help the people in desperate need of help. The failure by the government to fulfil the aspirations of the people raises question on the democratic credentials of the Kamwitu government, which by no means involves people in decision making. On this aspect, Beetham (1992, p.40) notes:

A mode of decision-making about collectively binding rules and policies over which the people exercise control and the most equal rights to take part in such decision-making directly-one that is to say, which realizes to the greatest conceivable degree the principles of popular control and equality in its exercise.

According to Beetham, in any democratic government the voices of the poorest and the most vulnerable are integrated in the final decision-making, especially when it comes to the allocation and utilisation of development resources. As the ruling party has an overwhelming majority of MPs, it rules with impunity since it can vote in even the most unpopular budgets. This fact makes a mockery of the multi-party democracy since diversity in this case does not guarantee the upholding of the ideals of genuine democracy. After all, Parliament is divided on the basis of "views of the opposition" and "views of the ruling party," with the ruling party having the final say in the winner-take-all system. In this way, the novel challenges the concept of collective responsibility, a concept many ruling parties in Africa embrace due to fear of the opposition. Bwana Kakinga, one of the characters in the novel, tells Ngowe that after the birth of the multi-party system, "the new leadership came in with the politics of fear. They were scared of the opposition. They regarded the new opposition as the country's enemy no. 1" (Mayega, 2004, p.37). In any democratic government, "democracy seeks efficient institutions and a predictable economic and political environment necessary for economic growth" (Abdellatif, 2003, p.10). As narrated in *The People's Schoolmaster*, the ruling party of Kumwitu directs all the nation's resources to eliminate the opposition instead of bringing about development that would benefit the common people.

Through Bwana Kakinga, *The People's Schoolmaster* suggests that the leaders of Kumwitu are not responsible and accountable to the people. Accountability is the ability to determine who in government is responsible for a decision or action and the ability to ensure that officials are answerable for their actions. Accountability comes through the establishment of an appropriate monitoring system that allows for a fair and transparent allocation of government resources. In the absence of accountability, the majority pays a high price and suffers from corruption because they often lack the power and knowledge to avoid paying bribes and to defend themselves and their own rights (Renzio, 1997).

Similarly, in the novel the reader is told early that the people of Kumwitu are ignorant regarding corruption; they do not give bribes but take them. During elections candidates competing for leadership bribe the people for their votes. Ngowe, reminds the people of Kumwitu:

I told you that pompous candidates were no good for us. A beautiful peacock needs no ornaments. They came that way to hide their great weaknesses as leaders I told you to receive their money, to consume their food and drink whatever they offered. All those are your rights. It was your money they were using. They got it through foul means. That is why I told you to take it and deny them your votes. But you did not listen to me...I recall telling you that a candidate is assessed by the

policies he advocates. His party's policies. Policies that can be implemented...But you took their money and gave them your votes. , Elders and youth you all wore their T-shirts, printed their faces. Mothers and girls, you gyrated your waists as though they were boneless while ululating for pieces of "Kanga" and "Kitenge" offered to you by the candidates...(Mayega, 2004, p. 8).

This statement foreshadows the problems the people of Kumwitu face later in the novel. As the plot of the novel unravels, some prominent leaders, especially the Prime Minister, back the presence of foreign investors regardless of whether these investments benefit the people or not. Frederick de Witts, the owner of the beef packing industry, bribes ministers and Members of Parliament (MPs) to silence these leaders in order to siphon out and misappropriate the wealth and natural resources of Kumwitu.

Ironically, the elected leaders of Kumwitu justify the gifts as an African traditional hospitality--*takrma* not associated with corruption. The issue of *takrma* (African traditional hospitality) the novel raises has been well-debated in Tanzania. In fact, it was part of the Electoral Laws Act No. 4 of 2000 that covers normal or traditional hospitality known as *takrma* in Kiswahili. The provisions of section 98 (2) and (3) of the Electoral Law (Miscellaneous Amendment) Act no 4 of 2000 was amended to read: "for purposes of subsection (1), anything done in good faith as an act of normal hospitality shall be deemed not to be treating." The phrase was immediately followed by subsection (3) which reads: "normal or ordinary expenses spent in good faith in the election campaigns or in the ordinary course of the election process shall be deemed not to be treating bribery or illegal practice." Since the enactment of this law, a distinction between bribery and *takrma* was not made until the High Court declared *takrma* unconstitutional. The point behind this legal loophole is that political leaders in Tanzania abused this *takrma* for political purposes—bribe their way to power. In fact, Kitundu (2005) contends that government leaders of Tanzania told the aggrieved party to go and contest the token of *hospitality* in court. Generally, opponents of *takrma* assert that "Swarms of moneyed goons began making their way into politics", fuelling the *takrma* practice (Rioba, 2005, p.8) because they now realised they could exploit this loophole to bribe their way into political power.

Against this backdrop, it is evident that the novel presents *takrma* as a form of corruption. As the leaders of Kumwitu fear the opposition parties, they will do anything to stay in power. They are aware that people would not vote for them since they know of their misdeeds and corrupt. Thus they resort to *takrma* to retain their positions of power. Like many African countries, political reforms and multi-democracy in Tanzania started in earnest in 1992. Such political liberalisation occurred simultaneously with economic reforms. The envisaged changes were mainly directed towards improving democracy from a single to a multi-party system. The multi-party system was a Western-engineered precondition for building a democratic society and liberalised economy, a precondition the foreign donors made clear before dispensing any loans or aid.

The Western countries are generally suspicious of single party systems, which they fear limit peoples' participation in the decision-making process, and believe the multi-party system encourages active participation that in turn influences government decisions (Joinet, 2001). In *The People's Schoolmaster*, the government of Kumwitu follows a multi-party system but governs as though it were still governing under a one-party system, having unlimited power and authority, and curtailing the very freedoms of its citizens democracy is supposed to uphold. The argument the novel appears to make is that, whereas African leaders have accepted the conditions that ushered in political and economic liberalisation, they only pay the principles of democracy lip-service. As Oluigbo (2010, para 1) notes:

...One of the greatest problems militating against the realization of this dream [democracy] of a democratic Africa has been a tendency among leaders of African nations to pay lip service to the ideals of democracy while at the same time formulating policies and perpetrating actions that are antithetical to democracy, thereby bringing about the negation of democratic values and flagrant abuse of democratic principles.

In *The People's Schoolmaster*, the South African investor Frederick de Witts, exposes the truth about foreign investors and how he managed to build the beef packing industry in Kumwitu. This happens when the people of Kamwitu corners him and coerces him to confess the truth. De Witts reveals how the so-called investors went “into gold mining, others in[to] fisheries and all other places that looked lucrative” (Mayega, 2004, p. 85) without necessarily bringing in real capital. Instead, they buy big companies without spending a single cent. These shady investors achieve their objectives by bribing the authorities and dictating the prices at which they purchase the hitherto public parastatal organisations (Mayega, 2004, pp. 85-86).

The People's Schoolmaster ridicules politicians for abusing *takrima* for personal gain. Politicians manipulate the term *takrima*—evidently corruption—to mean African hospitality. In African traditional usage, “hospitality would require that the visitor or the guest receives the highest degree of hospitality” (Rioba, 2005, p.8). The guest is served with the best meal, the best drink and finally the best bed. The reverse of this practice cannot amount to African hospitality. The novel suggests that if one votes for a candidate who has bribed one, one will never be answerable to that person. The leaders of Kumwitu are irresponsible as they put self-aggrandizement before the interests of their people. The novel thus introduces the issue of individualism which in traditional African societies is weakening traditional values, communities and established institutions that promoted communalism or the interest of the majority. In *The People's Schoolmaster*, Mageuzi explains that the country is divided into “haves” and “have-nots”, hence facilitating the emergence of classes in Kumwitu (Mayega, 2004, p. 96). He blames the government for creating a class-based society, ignoring the foundation on which the country was built (Mayega, 2004, p. 95).

The novel mentions the way former leaders led the country. By mentioning founding fathers the novel alludes to people such as Julius Nyerere, the first president on Tanzania, and Rashid Kawawa, both selfless leaders who founded Tanzania on the basis of equality and unity (*ujamaa* and *umoja* in Kiswahili, the country's lingua franca). But in Kumwitu, only the corrupt rich benefit from the fruits of liberalisation. They send their children to the best schools in Europe and “driv[e] the latest models of automobiles” (Mayega, 2004, p. 96). Because the political leaders have manipulated, rigged and used bribery in the form of *takrima* to stay in power, the people of Kumwitu--after the successful revolution--decide to amend the constitution to ensure such abuses of authority do not recur in future. They know that peace, tranquillity, and good governance result from free and fair elections (Mayega, 2004, p. 98-104). The novel suggests that in many African nation-states preaching good governance and democratic government do not necessarily translate into free, fair and competitive elections. Neither does such a climate make it possible to remove bad or corrupt political leaders from power.

In a democratic society, the views of the majority represent the will of the people. Failure to respect the wishes of the majority often translates into failure for that society (Komba, 2005, p.5). *The People's Schoolmaster* insists repeatedly on the importance of building real democracy. The novel suggests that participatory democracy is a deliberative dialogue and decision-making process, representing all voices and diverse perspectives to enforce meaningful change. But the majority of the people are marginalised in *The People's Schoolmaster*, and their views or ideas ignored. For instance, when Ngowe, the Schoolmaster, who represents the aspirations of the common people, informs the government about the negative effects of the factory in Kamwitu, his views are rejected. Instead, he gets a warning letter from the government:

For a long time now, the Government has tolerated your activities of inciting the masses against it. You have been influencing pupils as well as the general public to hate their beloved Government. You must understand that what you are doing is very dangerous. Those pupils are not your property. They belong to the nation! So, what makes you feel concerned about them? The Government is closely following your nefarious activities. They call you ‘Liberator’! Whom are you liberating? And from whom? Be warned that you are committing treason; and the punishment for treason is hanging by the neck until you die...In that respect, I have been

instructed by the Prime Minister...to give you this stern warning. Please bear all this brotherly admonitions in mind and take care (Mayega, 2004, pp.4-5).

Here the novel highlights the way the people who demand for changes are terrorised by leaders and forced into silence. Ngowe is accused by the government of attempting to mobilise the people towards a revolution. What this official letter does is confirm the absence of democracy and good governance in Kumwitu. How can the government of Kumwitu that calls itself a people's government fail to listen to the voice of the people? (Mayega, 2004, p. 5). In other words, democracy in Kamwitu is no true democracy.

In a democratic society, the rich and the poor, men and women, the educated and non-educated, are required to influence government decisions and live in dignity "conscious of the personal value of all the members of the society" (Joinet, 2001, p.16). Heywood (2001, p.71) explains that in a democratic society "people are seen as having a basic right to participate in the making of any decisions that affect their lives." The people of Kumwitu, on the other hand, understand that they have no right to participate in the decision-making process that affects their lives. Because the government has denied them the right to speak, they resolve to forcefully remove the factory from their midst. They insist, "[W]e have gone through enough trouble. There are comes a time when one must stage a protest" (Mayega, 2004, p. 5). The use of violence, an option which the people of Kumwitu choose is a means for calling for social justice.

The novel also appears to argue that only when conditions of good governance and the rule of law are fulfilled can a true democracy emerge in an African nation-state. Good governance is the degree to which an elected government delivers on the promises of promoting human rights, civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights (UNHCR, 2003). In *The People's Schoolmaster*, when the people of Kumwitu convene a peaceful public rally, carrying banners bearing different messages to press the government to relocate the factory, the police intercept the demonstration. The police use bullets and tear gases to disperse the people (Mayega, 2004, p. 10).

History shows that normally many African leaders use the state security apparatus to silence the people who dare to protest against the wrongs committed by their governments. In other words, security forces quash dissent instead of safeguarding the interests of the people. This draconian tactic contravenes the spirit of universal human rights. By crushing the demonstration of the people of Kumwitu, the government of Kumwitu confirms that it does not respect human rights and the rule of law, the cornerstones of a free and democratic society. In other words, it will crush any dissent even when the people have a right to demand for change.

The People's Schoolmaster serves as a warning to emerging democracies in Africa. It warns African leaders that supposedly silent and docile people can be motivated towards instituting social change. Whereas at the beginning of the novel the people of Kumwitu, with an exception of Ngowe Boniface and Mageuzi (the novel's conscientised voices), are a silent and docile populace. They accept whatever their leaders say. But as the story progresses, they begin to be conscious that their leaders are disempowering them. Eventually, they begin to take collective action to oppose their leaders and institute the desired social and political change. Behind this transformation is Ngowe Boniface, a man of wisdom, eloquence, and confidence. Ngowe did fight for independence and thus he has the mandate to organise the people towards building a democratic and people-centred nation that resists corrupt practices. The novel's view is that history is cyclic, meaning the people will keep on fighting for their rights until they get them. Indeed, Ngowe, the symbolic character standing for the rights of disparate forces opposed to dictatorship in Kumwitu, makes this clear in his speech to the people of Kumwitu:

... That is where these few hyenas have led our country to. It is for that reason you and I have to wage the second war of liberation. The war is going is going to be more difficult than our earlier one, because this time around the colonialists are our own people. They have blinded themselves by embracing bogus investors due to corruption. Our currency is falling by the day while they sing that the economy is growing. Indeed in order to understand their economies, you must

yourself be a staunch believer in the powers of darkness. The power of evil (Mayega, 2004, p. 41).

The second liberation refers to post-independence struggle that should follow political (or flag) independence obtained from the colonial power to end the subjugation of the people by their own self-serving leaders and promote good governance and true democracy. Inevitably, during the first demonstration, the masses are afraid of the armed forces. After the soldiers fire the bullets at the crowd, the people ran away (Mayega, 2004, p. 10). But history has taught the people of Kumwitu that to win the war against corrupt leaders, they must be ready to make a sacrifice, including losing their lives. Thus, the ending of the novel foreshadows the future. The novel climaxes with the people of Kumwitu uniting and beginning to fight against the corrupt leaders and bogus foreign investors. Though the government intervenes as usual by using force, the people of Kumwitu succeed in banishing the negative forces. Without the sophisticated weaponry of the government troops, women, for example, lay down before government soldiers singing opposing to what the government is doing to them (Mayega, 2004, pp. 78-79).

The implication of this defiance is that the will of the people will in the end prevail so as to install true democracy in African nation-states. This drastic measure taken by the people of Kumwitu is a coded warning to African governments taking the people for granted that in the end only genuine democracy and good governance can appease and placate the people.

Conclusion

The People's Schoolmaster is a novel which advises governments to adhere to the principles of democracy for peace and tranquillity to prevail. Through Ngowe Boniface, the novel demonstrates that leaders can play an important role in the creation of a true democratic society, hence the need for them to recognise and adhere to democratic principles. Specifically, the novel stresses the importance of democratic rule. As Ngowe Boniface, the protagonist, puts it, leaders need to be accountable, responsible and results-oriented so that the people can benefit from the national resources at their disposal. Through Ngowe, Mageuzi and Bwana Kakinga, the novel suggests that democracy can only thrive when there is transparency and accountability in the nation's political, social and economic affairs. The demonstration against Frederick De Witt's factory seeks to alert the government on the importance of involving people in the decision-making process.

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