

CASA ESSAY

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ASSESSING THE POSSIBILITIES FOR AN AUGUSTAN REVOLUTION IN AILING DEMOCRACIES IN AFRICA

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In the years that ran up to Actium, many in the Roman world became convinced that there was a desperate need for change. The interventions of Sulla and, later, Julius Caesar, had left an indelible mark on the nature of the Roman state. While men like Cicero believed in a return to a strict interpretation of the Roman constitution (or at least the traditions, *mos maiorum*, which constituted it) and the old Republican laws governing offices and officers, Augustus and his allies saw the only way forward as to reinvent that constitution. In his efforts to reshape and remodel Rome's operational politics, Augustus could be ruthless. He brooked no opposition and no rival. He used the Senate, army, and other organs of state to achieve the purposes he judged best for the political, social, and economic growth of the *res publica*. In this, Augustus was what modern economists call a 'benevolent dictator'. In this essay, I shall appraise the role of Augustus as such a dictator and then consider the scope for such an Augustan office as a solution or a transitional state of affairs for weak democracies or full-blown autocracies in Africa.¹

In this essay, unless otherwise stated, I shall be using 'dictator' and 'dictatorship' as it is applied in modern economics and especially in the work of Gilson and Milhaupt (2011:229). When referring to Augustus, therefore, as a dictator, it is not in the same sense as the office occupied by Julius Caesar nor, indeed, that by Sulla.²

As with most study of the Augustan period, it is prudent to begin, as did Suetonius, with the *princeps*' illustrious father, Julius Caesar. The crossing of the Rubicon in 49 BC under arms brought an end of some sort to the manner of politics

¹ It should be understood by the reader that I have no formal experience in economics and am relying solely on informal reading on the subject. I should like to express my great and heartfelt gratitude to Prof. Martine de Marre of the University of South Africa for her support.

² On the office of the dictator in Republican Rome, see Gardner 2009.

which had dominated Rome for the previous century, and Caesar himself was aware of it (Plut. *Caes.* 32.5). It is at this stage that Stocker (1970:8) declares the Republic as it was understood at the time to be dead in the water and in need of dire reform. Julius Caesar conquered Rome and most of his enemies by the sword and with the intention of taking absolute control of the state. What he did with the state once he had control followed Sulla's example and set a precedent for Augustus—he instituted much needed reforms (Plut. *Caes.* 37.2). The use of the sword in the political transfer of power in the aftermath of Sulla's career became evermore the norm in Roman politics until the advent of Augustus' reign (App. 16.1). Julius Caesar's politics by the sword ended hopes of peaceful politics for a generation.

The end of the Roman republic as it had existed from the expulsion of the kings has been attributed to multiple causations over the course of the years. The ancients themselves pointed to the corruption of the political class due to the influx of foreign wealth through military prowess as the root of many of the problems which afflicted the state (Sall. *Iug.* 4.7). While Tacitus (*Ann.* 1.1) was referring to a time long after this decay had completed its lasting effects, he does speak of the general desire for an end to the civil conflicts which had become endemic by that time. Militarism had made Rome both rich and safe, but it came with dire consequences. General-magistrates with no external threats caused an about-turn in focus for those great men of the Roman armies towards achieving their political goals. They leveraged their great wealth to court the favour of their colleagues and the common people alike, but this practice was often condemned.³ Levick (1982:52) has pointed to the 'ban on extravagance at funerals' from the *XII Tabulae* as an example of the longstanding dislike of ostentatiousness in Roman public life. In the last century of the Republic, ostentatiousness and militarism increased to unprecedented levels.

This is not to say that militarism and luxury ceased to be a problem after the Augustan revolution. Rather than the eradication of wealth and political militarism, Augustus' peace and stability ensured that they existed in controlled forms which did not threaten the state. Once he had concentrated military power in his own hands and delegated certain responsibilities to trusted subordinates such as Agrippa (Syme 1979:309), the Augustan system was able, for many years,⁴ to sustain the peace and prevent the politicisation of the Roman military, thus cementing the *princeps*' role as peacekeeper. A benevolent dictator. The rampant luxury created

³ On efforts to win the hearts and votes of the Roman populace, see Robb 2018.

⁴ Tac. *Hist.* 1.4 speaks of the end of this period in Roman history with his catchy statement which summarises the consequences of the year of the four emperors: *evulgato imperii arcano posse principem alibi quam Romae fieri* / 'for the secret of empire was now disclosed, that an emperor could be made elsewhere than at Rome'.

by Augustus after Actium kept the political class subservient and the *plebs* loyal to the hero who had secured the treasures of Egypt and the abundant East for the use of the Roman people.

Similarly, the rampant political corruption in the late Republic did not so much cease to be but was rather placed in the sole control of the *princeps* who appointed able men to accomplish his ends. Corruption has been inherent in politics for millennia and it is foolhardy to think that it can be cured easily (Lintott, 1990:2). Lintott (1990:6) considered Plutarch's discussion of the bribery trial of C. Marius (*Mar.* 5.2–6) as an example of the use of corrupt means to political office. Marius was desperate for a public career at any cost, but he was caught in the act of attempting to purchase his magistracy. He nevertheless subsequently succeeded in doing so. Later, Dio (49.43.1) uses peculiar language in his description of the appointment, in 33BC, of Marcus Agrippa to the post of aedile. He 'agreed to be made aedile', essentially a step down since he had already occupied more senior positions, because it suited the pleasure of Augustus. Even then, Augustus was using his powers, public image, and wealth to manipulate the offices of state (Beacham 2005:158), as one would expect a benevolent dictator to do in his programme of reform.

In general, the process of democratisation on the African continent faces many challenges, but political militarism, as in Rome, is one of the direst of these. Khadiagala (1995:61) posits that the militarism of the political culture in African countries is not conducive to democratic ideals. It is clear that neither Julius Caesar, Augustus, nor any of the other politicians who held sway over the course of the latter half of the first century AD, would have received the Ibrahim Prize for African Leadership (Kamp 2017:53). But African parallels of poor leadership are not hard to find. In fact, Kamp's (2017:54) discussion of failed transitions of power could quite easily be set in the immediate aftermath of Caesar's assassination in 44 BC as does the populace's general desire for peace and continuity (App. 14.131.1).

Foreign aid and, more recently, loosely defined loans represent an influx of wealth into Africa as her nations continue in an ostensible struggle towards democratisation. As shown by Findley *et al.* (2017:640), aid is a mixed bag where there is a great deal of diversity when it comes to how it is used for the benefit of citizens and elites. Whether or not African citizens' positions are furthered by these donations, the allocations of projects and development are influenced by elites which is often to the great benefit of members of parliament and other officials. Can this be so different from the use of patrician wealth in Rome to secure offices and create political goodwill in the city? In the light of the Arab Spring, Nega & Schneider (2012:635) make a case for the eventual fall of oppressively corrupt and militaristic oligarchies to democratic institutions in Africa due to the discontent of the people. The development of Egypt's Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's government

towards greater oppression makes it clear that democratisation has failed in the light of continued corruption and politicisation of the military (Freedom House 2021). In the aftermath of the revolution in 2011, the West lauded the efforts of the people for the creation of democratic states in northern Africa, but inherent militarism has led the region straight back into the clutches of a new class of non-democratic elites. African political life is sick. The patient is in desperate need of intervention. A major question is therefore posed: could an Augustus improve the situation in Egypt and similar states?

A prominent theme in the ancient writers is that good leadership is the result of the moral worth of the man who leads the government (App. *B. Civ.* 1.1; Tac. *Hist.* 3.1; Dio Cass. 3.12.9). Augustus tried, throughout his tenure in public life, to cultivate an image of the ideal and morally upright Roman. It is a key element of his propaganda. He learnt to pay attention to public opinion as a means of judging the mood of the populace.⁵ He is famous for the moral laws which he passed⁶ and the manner in which he controlled his household affairs.⁷ As found by Van Zant & Moore (2015:940), leaders are more effective when their subordinates consider their private intentions to be moral—they receive more support for their policies due to this perception. Augustus, although not privy to the latest psychology, certainly knew this and acted accordingly. It could be contested that he was a moral man with the good of the state close to his heart; he certainly tries to give the reader such an image of himself in the *Res Gestae*.⁸ His piety and private dedication to moral and decent living increased his public and political credit (Scheid 2005:177).

It has been stated that the theme of corruption and militarism runs deep in African politics—both of which are considered to be the antithesis of ethical execution of public duties in a democratic office. Kamp (2017:59) shows there is an established trend of using the powers of the state to benefit the leader's circle of cronies to the detriment of the people. Beyond that, these leaders have a propensity for holding on to their power for decades at a time, which only increases the damage done by their regimes. If corruption is the blight of African society, what is the

⁵ The accounts in Suet. *Aug.* 70.1–2 and 72.1 show that, after the scandal created by the banquet of the twelve gods, Augustus moderated his life and evermore sought an image of control.

⁶ For instance, the *lex Papia et Poppaea* and the *lex Iulia maritandis ordinibus*.

⁷ For example, the exile of Julia the Elder for her publicised escapades as described in Suet. *Aug.* 65.1

⁸ Aug. *RG* 1.1: *Annos undeviginti natus exercitum privato consilio et privata impensa comparavi, per quem rem publicam dominatione factionis oppressam in libertatem vindicavi* (At the age of nineteen on my own responsibility and at my own expense I raised an army, with which I successfully championed the liberty of the republic when it was oppressed by the tyranny of a faction).

solution? In the model presented by Gilson & Milhaupt (2011:245) a benevolent dictator, who can harness the resources of an economy, disregarding the political costs of his programme, provide stability and create a culture of economic growth, could in theory allow a country to modernise and flourish. This dictator should be able to act as freely as possible in his remodelling of the state and the economy, being trusted by the people because of his moral worth and pious approach to the well-being of the country. This is what Augustus did in Rome through his preservation of the peace which in turn created a climate for a social and cultural flowering (Cary & Scullard 1975:315). Augustus was the publicly moral leader which Rome needed at the time.

So far, I have mentioned the militarism of both Rome and Africa as a fundamental feature of the two political cultures. One thing must be clear from the end of the civil wars under Octavius: he accomplished it through the establishment of his own domination in all aspects of Roman public life, including the military. The Roman army was a political engine which churned out politicians from the aristocracy and created social mobility in the lower orders.⁹ This was a basic fact of Roman political life, before and after Actium. It has also been a fact in many African countries in the last fifty years. Idi Amin and Mabuto Seseseko, Muamar Gaddafi, and Paul-Henri Damiba all led regimes which leveraged the military might of their movements over all forms of civilian government. Furthermore, there have been and are a plethora of governments in Africa which have used the might of the army to enforce the will of the elites on the poverty-stricken populations of the continent. Khadiagala (1995:67–69) states that militarism is a phenomenon in African politics resulting from deeper cultural and ethnic fault lines. Just as in Rome, the voices of a people facing existential threats are often made known through the use of armed conflict which justifies and codifies that military culture in the political make-up of the state.¹⁰ Rome could not change her militaristic nature, lest she lose her empire, but she needed a strong, benevolent dictator to ensure that it did not consume her completely as it threatened to do during the Civil Wars of the final decades of the first century BC. Many states in Africa find themselves in a similar state of affairs and may thus benefit from a figure like Augustus.

Looming largest among Tacitus' accusations against Augustus is that he hammered home the final nail in the coffin of the republic, but Tacitus does admit that the new system brought tranquillity and security which the old could not offer

⁹ Wallace-Hadrill (2005:75) discusses this idea with reference to Cicero's *Pro Lege Manilia* speech.

¹⁰ App. *B.Civ.* 2.1 describes one of the many instances where the Romans were threatened by both their neighbours and disaffected Romans who took up with or incited their enemies causing a military culture to percolate.

(Tac. *Ann.* 1.2–3). We may infer a question in Tacitus' admission. Did Augustus save the people, if not the system of republican government which had ensured that they had greater involvement in the government of the state? I contend that the stability provided by the Augustan settlements and his assiduous work with and within the Senate ensured that the people could rely on the peace and build their lives in the greater assurance of continued placidity. In the *Res Gestae*, Augustus is quick to point out the public benefits of his office through his direct donations to the people (15), his insurance of the food supply (18), his propping up of state finances (17) and his creation of communities for retired soldiers (16). Furthermore, he reassures the people that he did not take over the country completely but worked in tandem with the Senate for the greater peace and prosperity of Rome (13; 34). Dio (53.19.1) states emphatically that it was by means of putting the republic aside that he saved the people from the terrors of war and starvation; in 53.21.7 he relates that Augustus was careful to ensure that the candidates whom he put forward for public office were not tainted with the odium of corruption or ineptitude. Whatever may be said for the imperial administration under later *principes*, Augustus' moral uprightness in his dealings with the state ensured that he was trusted to 'administer the empire' (Dio 53.22.1). Under Augustus, the administration of the empire provided opportunities for Romans of all social extractions to seek opportunities and advancement in various posts around the Mediterranean world.¹¹ The boom in employment did come at the cost of the subject peoples, but there is another essential aspect to the role of the benevolent dictator: he offers stability through the creation of opportunity and advancement, not only through the security of peace at home and abroad.

There is one final question, then, that I shall pose: can an Augustus save African countries where democracy is clearly failing? I cannot say whether he could or not. Augustus was the product of his time and culture and an African Augustus would have to be exactly that—a man of his own time and space. Gilson and Milhaupt (2011:230) are quite correct in their assertion that '[s]erendipity, not planning, explains the appearance of growth-seeking autocratic regimes.' Rome struck it lucky with Augustus. While many African nations would benefit immensely from an Augustan regime, it may be that the cost in the loss of freedoms, the abuse of rights and the longevity of the system might mean little change in the quality of life for the average African family, which nullifies the benefits such a dictator might have for the nation. On the other hand, an Augustan figure may just provide the kickstart which emerging African economies need. The long and the short of it is that Augustus was what Rome needed, but he was not the only possible

¹¹ See Purcell 2005:93 for a fuller picture of the role which Romans played in other areas of empire.

solution to the problem of her ailing republic. Neither is a benevolent dictator the only solution to the problem of slow economic growth and corrupt political systems bogged down by militarism in Africa.

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