

Bumpy Ride to Human Rights

The state of Africa's roads are a good indicator of its economic strength and political governance

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One wouldn't naturally make a connection between a country's infrastructure – such as its roads – and its style and state of democracy, including how it governs its economic resources.

But in my travels across the continent I have observed a close relationship between the state of a country's roads and its governance system.

In crisis-ridden Zimbabwe, the roads are a very clear indicator of the country's deterioration, over the last 10 years or so, of economic decline and political instability.

Only now, with the establishment of a unity government, are the main roads leading to major cities being refurbished. The 10 km stretch of road between Beitbridge and Bulawayo, for example, was finally completed in a very short amount of time after many years of neglect.

The refurbishing of roads seems to be symbolic of a paradigm shift, especially in the field of governance. A well-constructed road network symbolises a well-governed society whose leaders respect and uphold human rights.

However, just like the precarious settlement that the warring political parties agreed to, the refurbishing of roads in Zimbabwe also appears to have just scratched the surface and not addressed the foundation of the problem.

This is made clearer when travelling to the main cities of Harare and Bulawayo. One is immediately confronted by a parlous road, littered with several potholes – a metaphor for the disregard paid to the heart of the political and economic body. This raises the question, if the roads right in the middle of the cities are not refurbished, is it not a matter of time that the rot will begin on the refurbished ones?

Is it surprising that the political and economic situations have not been resolved, since governance is interlinked and inherently part of economic and political life? Here not much has changed, just like the potholes in the cities.

One can take any country in Africa today and use the analogy of the road to describe the state of development and governance of that country.

In a politically stable country like South Africa, the construction of roads is charging ahead, largely driven by the 2010 Fifa World Cup.

This says a lot about South Africa's state of development and democracy, including human rights: the country's democracy and governance are in constant construction and reconstruction. In countries where the roads are dusty, rugged and winding, so are the states of governance, development and democratisation.

One also gets a political solution from how roads are constructed. To construct a durable road, one needs to use the correct materials, appropriate measurements and adopt a holistic approach that entails constant refurbishing.

Similarly, in the arena of politics and economic governance – including human rights protection – only by building accountability mechanisms can we be convinced that the political potholes will not emerge again.

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