Of African dictators and their survival tactics

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There is a way to remember Omar Bongo of Gabon which will tell us a lot about democracy. You are already reading about his mostly benevolent dictatorship and his facility with patronage. But I want you to remember his sunglasses. Bongo was a natty dresser. He hobnobbed with the rich and famous and owned some of the choicest real estates in Paris. He was also a thief who liked to think of himself as a Robin Hood of sorts. He sucked wealth out of his country and threw back scraps finely calibrated to keep his regime and its dependents fed but not powerful enough to challenge him.

When he appeared in public, Bongo frequently wore eye protection against the harsh equatorial sun and possibly against the hungry stares or conspiratorial glances of his people. But his were not the sinister wrap around shades of the wide boy or thuggish security operative. Neither were they the mirrored, gold rimmed aviators of the messianic junior officer newly made dictator. Bongo's, around-the-eyes sunglasses were elegant, almost feminine. They were the eyewear of a man who knew he had nothing to fear, who dressed and acted only for himself.

Bongo showed very little fear in his decades of kleptocratic strangling of Gabon. When you personally hold the money which gives life or death to a whole nation you can afford to be serene, urbane and superfluously generous. This is not the case for rulers who, even though they themselves benefit from access to the public purse, simply don't have enough money to buy off everyone who might want their job.
The reason this is important for democracy is that you can tell a lot about a person by looking at them. Appearance isn't everything, but is powerful clue to what lies beneath. If leaders show themselves, then you ought not to trust them. When they hide behind their sunglasses you should wonder what they are thinking. Leaders who relate to their constituents in this way have something to hide. It might be criminal activity or it might simply be deep insecurity. Either way you should be suspicious when they look you in the eye when asking for your support or announcing a policy. If you are certain of your leaders, then you can be certain of your ability to hold them to account. That is not democracy.

There is another, far scarier species of leader, and this one eschews eye wear altogether. The self-possessed autocrat isn't afraid to look you in the eye because he doesn't care if you are there. He might go into public with other accessories to show off his power, like a fly whisk or a leopard skin or a favourite hat.

But he will look you in the eye. You should not be fooled into believing that he sees you, though. He looks at you as he would look at a wall which blocks his path. He is calculating whether to go over you, around you or through you in order to resume his journey. Sometimes the look is wide eyed, as if he is shocked at the audacity of fate which has placed you in his way.

Leaders like this are on a mission, and their success or failure does not depend on you, individually. They don't wear sunglasses, the better to see and evaluate obstacles and threats. This is not the attitude of a man like Bongo, who moved about with a personal aura of comfort and security. It is the shrewdness of the guerrilla fighter.

It is also the paranoia of the hunted animal. The two have a lot in common, as anyone who spent years in the bush will tell you. But when the survival tactics of the bush permeate peaceful civilian rule the result can only be bad for democracy. As long as you remain silent you can be mistaken for an obstacle.

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