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Cape Verdean Wins Mo Ibrahim Prize ^[1]

Americans learn in high school that one of the greatest acts in our history happened when George Washington said no when offered the opportunity to stay in power. He actually said it twice. The first time came at the end of the long war for independence. Instead of accepting a title of nobility and possible kingship, Washington famously took off his uniform and returned to Mt. Vernon a civilian, an American Cincinnatus. Called back into service as president, Washington again said no when pressured to run for a third term, setting a precedent that endured for a century and a half, and which now is set into the Constitution. We celebrate Washington because he, more than anyone, assured us a legacy in which the Constitution, not a personality, remains central to who we are. Thus, there have been no American Cromwells, Napoleons, Porfirios, Mussolinis, Francos, Mobutus, Mubaraks, or Maos. In our heart of hearts as a nation, we remain skeptical of those who would concentrate power in one office and one person.

DEPERSONALIZING POLITICS

Self-made Sudanese billionaire Mo Ibrahim learned Washington's lesson well. Seeking a way to nurture the same tradition of democratic rule of law and abnegation of personality on his continent, Ibrahim decided to use his vast fortune to celebrate the George Washingtons of Africa. He established the Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership. The "leadership" here means having said no to unending power, to having set the example of depersonalized politics and alternation of office so desperately needed in societies struggling to build institutions that are greater than the sum of individuals.

SO FAR ONLY THREE WINNERS

Only three men have received the prize of 5 million dollars: first were Festus Mogae of Botswana and Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique. Last week, Cape Verde's former President, Prime Minister and veteran political figure Pedro Pires, 77, won the award for his contribution to Cape Verde as a "model of democracy, stability, and increased prosperity." Specifically, the award cited his influence in assuring Cape Verde's successful transition in the early 1990s from one-party to multi-party governance. In his typically modest fashion, Pires heard the news during his daily workout at a gym. Sweating, short of breath, and a bit startled, Pires spoke to reporters emphasizing the Cape Verdean nation, not his own individual role. Then he politely begged the reporters to let him finish his exercise routine. Asked later in the day how he planned to use the money, the now showered and refreshed Pires answered that he would use some of it to write his memoirs. And what memoirs they should be! Pires was a major figure not just in Cape Verdean, but in African history. Under his leadership as General Secretary, the then-dominant liberation party, the African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde (PAICV) lost the 1991 parliamentary and presidential elections. It gracefully ceded power to the opposition, setting a timely and important example not only for the country, but for the continent.

DON'T FORGET THE AFRICA OF 20 YEARS AGO

Consider for a moment the state of Africa two decades ago. In the wake of the fall of the

Berlin Wall, strongmen dominated much of the continent. Despite tentative olive branches, the white-minority apartheid apparatus still clung to power in South Africa with the barrel of a gun. Chissano's Mozambique had suffered a gruesome civil war and seemed set for a generation of violent retribution. It was at this moment that the wind of democratic change in Cape Verde began to blow across Africa. The Cape Verdean model of the strongman and his party stepping down after electoral defeat set the standard for such countries as South Africa and Mozambique. The vitality of the Cape Verdean democracy, so recently demonstrated in a hotly contested presidential contest to succeed Pires, remains a refreshing tonic for Africans struggling to find a lasting democratic way forward.

ARISTIDES PEREIRA: GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

No praise of Pires, however, should go without mention of his long-time comrade in arms, colleague in peace, and mentor in politics, Aristides Pereira, who passed away this September 22 at the age of 86. Pereira and Pires fought under the Cape Verde/Guinea-Bissau liberation movement's founder and leader, Amilcar Cabral in Guinea-Bissau. Eventually, they succeeded to his leadership. They knew much of the liberation-era leadership of Mozambique and Angola as well, including Chissano, who watched closely what the Cape Verdeans were achieving. For most of Pereira's tenure as president (1975-1991), Pires was prime minister. Together, they directed Cape Verde out of five centuries of suffocating colonialism and into policies that have achieved a high rate of literacy, strong, consistent market-based economic growth, judicious regional leadership, as well as a democratic rule of law at home. Together, they said yes to democracy and bowed to then choice of the voters to leave office. In Cape Verde itself, the four-day mourning for Pereira has in many ways set the stage for Pires's award.

AMERICANS NOT ALWAYS FONDLY REMEMBERED

This award should also help Americans to remember a bit of our more recent and less pleasant history that Africans don't forget. Our legacy of official support for African decolonization started strong in the 1950s, but got mired in the currents of the Cold War in the 1960s. When independence movements in the parts of Africa still under Portuguese and white-minority rule sought help from Washington, Uncle Sam went missing in action. Leaders such as Pires and Chissano, however, tended to understand Americans better than Americans understood them. They sought and won help from non-official America – churches, NGOs, African Americans, individual volunteers, and countless community groups that demonstrated by their actions that the United States of America was much more than a government in Washington, DC, that it was indeed a small “d” democracy in which millions free persons could make their own political choices to support justice in Africa. The example of these private Americans in action cast a bright light on our own nation's grassroots democratic ideals that helps explain the enduring generosity of these African leaders toward the U.S., despite the lack of support from Washington, DC during the hard years.

CITIZEN PIRES

George Washington himself would have understood Pires. He fought against the French before fighting with them. He fought with the British before fighting against them. He swore fealty to the king before rejecting all royalty. And when all was said and done, he said no to being King George, American-style, no to being President-for-Life, and chose again to be Citizen Washington. Congratulations, Citizen Pires!

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