

Africa in the Next Fifty Years

by

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Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a real honor for me to be invited at this auspicious occasion and to join you in celebrating this important milestone in Africa's history. I wish to commend the organizers and especially Ms Onyeka Obasi, President of Friends of Africa International and her colleagues for making this possible thus giving us an opportunity to reflect on the past, and challenging us to contemplate the future.

As we do so, it is worthwhile to recall the passionate and rigorous discourses between the Monrovia and Casablanca groups. Subsequently, African leaders of different calibres and persuasions took us through different paths of development, each of them committed to their vision. There were also debates among our people – which took place on political platforms, in university halls, at diplomatic chambers and at times various factions fought on matters of vision and destiny.

What ultimately happened after 50 years is a narrative that has been eloquently highlighted by my dear brother Professor Ali Mazrui. In taking up the challenge of the forward looking dimension thrust upon me, I'm reminded of this evening of the laudable capacities of our Founding Fathers who paid attention to knowing where we are going, and to visualizing what it will take to get there and how we will be when we arrive. Where ever we ultimately found ourselves after 50 years is a moot point. The issue I am trying to raise is that – at least and within their limitations, our Founding fathers took cognizance of the necessity of looking forward and tried to mobilize us to getting there. I am afraid, at a certain juncture of the past few decades; we seem to have lost that compass, with all its attendant implications.

Let me begin by underlining some values and norms derived from the experience of what we have gone through as a continent and as a people, while not neglecting the global context. What are the valuable assets, particularly in terms of trajectories, that we should harness, deploy, sustain and carry forward?

For purposes of this occasion, I have chosen as a major milestone the gaining of political freedom and independence of our countries. How did we attain this achievement, especially in the case of those countries where colonialism and racism was not only totally intransigent but also enjoyed the support of some external powers? The simple answer is that it was because of the struggle of our people.

For example I recall that during my tenure of Office as the Permanent Representative of my country at the United Nations in the 1970s some of our friends in the West were talking about the “invincibility of the white redoubt in Southern Africa.” How then given the formidable obstacles that confronted the liberation movements, we are today able to be here and celebrate the independence of the entire continent?

Simply put three factors made this possible. First and foremost, the resilience, determination and sacrifices of the people and their liberation movements. Second, the unity and cohesion of the independent African states in supporting this struggle. True, the extent of that support varied from one country to another but the support was always there. Third, the valuable support and solidarity of the international community in various forms and manifestation.

With the independence of our countries it is pertinent to ask ourselves whether the Aims and Objectives articulated by the pioneers of our independence movements have been achieved or for that matter anywhere near fulfillment?

With few exceptions, the answer is conspicuously NO. The struggle for freedom was not merely that of regime change. It was intended to ensure larger freedoms including the right to decide how we are governed, by whom and for what period. It was to remove injustice and ensure that the country’s resources are utilized for the betterment of our peoples. It was to fight disease, ignorance and abject poverty.

As we therefore mark this golden jubilee and reflect and plan for the future there are some soul searching questions which we as Africans need to ask ourselves. Why the continent which is one of the richest if not the richest in terms of resources both human and material continues to have the poorest people? How do we overcome this blatant contradiction?

How can we rationally explain the continued and in some cases escalating internal conflicts in some parts of our continent with attendant loss of millions of lives, human misery and destruction.

How can we overcome the unenviable record of a Continent where millions of our people are forced to vote with their feet and thus languishing in refugee or internally displaced camps? How do we erase the image of a continent where corruption is considered endemic?

All these and many others are pertinent questions, which require answers and Concrete action as we contemplate the type of Africa we want to see in the coming decades. At the same time, this is not to say that all of Africa's problems are purely of our own making. Nor is it to deny the damaging legacy that Africa has inherited due to centuries of Slavery, Colonialism and Racist domination. It is simply to assert that after more or less fifty years of ruling ourselves we have to bear the primary responsibility for the good, the bad and the ugly that has been happening in our continent.

Some of our leaders in Africa including the former President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki have characterized the 21st Century as Africa's century. I believe that this is possible, achievable and most of all necessary. This should be our clarion call. The clarion of the new generation of young people who unlike in our times, has more privileges of global interconnectivity including advance communication technology, to use for fulfilling its generational mission. But we must move with seriousness and deliberate speed in addressing all those problems which are within our means to resolve. These include: To improve governance. Indeed this is the number one issue. All those who lead, at whatever level BUT especially as National Leaders, must be held accountable and act in a manner, which makes them truly servants of the people who have elected them to power. It is significant to observe in this context that practical experience has already demonstrated that where there is a responsible, accountable and incorruptible leadership abiding by the principles of good governance, their countries have made enormous progress in socio-economic development.

Good governance, democracy, accountability and transparency should be nurtured and sustained and above all be made an essential component of our societies. Africa should be in a forefront for the protection and respect of human and people's rights. To achieve this it is imperative to build democratic institutions, improve our educational system and strengthen the civil societies.

We must strive to uplift the lot of our people. Economic and social transformation is a prerequisite condition. In this context a number of factors need to be taken into account: Africa's immense natural and human resources must be mobilized and properly used for its development. The wealth and resources of our countries must be used to serve our people and not benefit a few individuals.

We must guard against the growing inequities in some of our societies, which cause resentment and despair among our people and especially the millions of unemployed young people. If we fail to redress this imbalance we run the risk of explosion and conflict.

We must gradually but firmly eliminate the contradiction of a very rich continent inhabited by the poorest people. We must promote openness and accountability in the utilization of our resources like oil, diamonds, gold, timber and other natural resources so as to ensure that they serve as national assets and not as a curse as is sometimes the case in some of our countries. All this needs strong, determined and strategic leadership with the firm support of responsible and proactive citizenry.

The women of Africa have been the most resilient and dynamic force. They constitute more than 50% of the entire population. They have played a crucial role in the struggle for independence and liberation wars. In conflict situations they bear a disproportionate burden of suffering. They have played and continue to play a pivotal role in all facets of economic and social development. *But their full potential has yet to be utilized.* And their role in decision making continues to be, by and large, sadly marginal.

Currently African countries are taking significant steps aimed at empowering women. This vital process needs to be encouraged and intensified. This powerful force, when properly empowered and allowed to make full use of their potential will unleash an irreversible movement towards the political, social and economic emancipation of the continent.

In the coming years Africa must continue its efforts in dealing with the scourge of conflict which has done so much damage to our people and societies. The African Union, through its Peace and Security Council is making an important contribution. Its efforts need to be augmented by inter alia through the provision of resources. This is one area where the goodwill of the international community in support of Africa's efforts has been clearly demonstrated. But Africa needs to do more indeed much more itself. Those African countries which are better endowed should really seriously assist in providing significant financial support.

In my opinion, it is unacceptable to rely mainly on external assistance carrying out the various peace support operations. Furthermore such excessive external dependence can be quite costly. I know this from personal experience when I served as the Secretary General of the then Organization of African Unity and also when I was the African Union Special Envoy and Chief Mediator of the Abuja Inter Sudanese Peace Talks on Darfur. Thus ultimately it is up to our own leaders – present and future – who can and should prevent conflicts through entrenching and practicing democratic governance, fair distribution of resources and proper and just treatment of all citizens.

Earlier in my remarks I spoke of the important contribution made by African countries through a united and cohesive approach in support of the struggle for freedom. It is necessary to emphasize and to assert that such unity and cohesion is absolutely indispensable if a new Africa is to emerge in the near future- a democratic, peaceful and prosperous Africa. An Africa where diversity of opinion is cherished and not suppressed, an Africa which takes its cultural diversity be it ethnic, racial or religious as a source of strength rather than a cause for constant bickering or even conflict; an Africa which is vigilant and responsive to the challenges and vagaries of climate change; an Africa rid of the scourge of internal conflicts where the phenomenon of child soldiers will be relegated to the dustbin of history; an Africa free of the horrors of pandemics such as HIV/AIDS and Malaria; an Africa where corruption is loathed and effectively combated and not accommodated and an Africa which is vibrant like its people, strong, dynamic and a major player in international affairs. Such an Africa is not only desirable but realizable.

This then brings me to the imperative necessity of Regional Integration- an objective which has clearly been adumbrated by then Organisation of African Unity and now the Africa Union. But the pace of integration continues to be agonizingly slow even though there are important efforts and achievements of the various African sub regional organizations. No single African country however important or well endowed can have any serious impact on a world scale. But the African collective cannot be ignored.

In this context, we should learn from the experience of our European friends and partners. Many of these countries are strong politically, economically, scientifically and militarily. They bear no comparison to individual African countries. Yet they have recognized their individual disadvantages and the merits of cooperation and integration in order inter alia to cope with the present and future challenges and opportunities facing them. In my view, for Africa, regional cooperation and integration is not a matter of choice but survival.

African leaders have taken a number of key decisions towards the realization of regional integration. Regrettably however, there is a great hiatus between those decisions and actual implementation.

One of the main challenges to this is how we take seriously the question of national and region wide infrastructural development and maintenance. There is an urgent need to improve infrastructure and among other things give practical meaning to the commitment to facilitate free movement of goods and peoples.

Apart from infrastructural development and strengthening of our regional economic schemes, we have a duty to bring the issue of United Africa to the people. While I am optimistic that United Africa Dream will be realized in the coming years, it is discouraging to see how ineffectively we have performed in strengthening the Pan African Identity among our people across borders. We are still lingering in an era of prejudices and stereotypes among us keeping our people further apart instead of moving us closer as people with shared history, challenges, opportunities, threats and identity. We need to use both continental inter governmental and non governmental institutions to protect, promote and nurture the vision of a United Africa for the new generation to effect within the coming years.

Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

All I have said so far are my aspirations – and probably yours also. However, we also know that the world does not move according to our wishes. We need to face up to the challenges of realities on the ground. Of utmost importance is for us to have an idea of our trajectory and be prepared for the destination.

For purposes of this reflection I thought it is worthwhile to recognize at least two dynamics which are very much linked - though in reality they may manifest themselves separately. These are the internal transformations within the continent as underlined by potential and actual trends manifesting themselves over time and in every sphere. Associated with the internal processes are the global trends which influence, impinge and impact on the Continent providing it different positions within the constellation of forces.

It is relevant here to underscore the proposition that global trends and what is being manifested in other parts of the world offer the possibilities that Africa can attain, and opportunities it can harness – if it repositions itself internally appropriately.

More concretely, I have referred earlier to the process of integration, which is gathering strong momentum in the Continent with Regional Economic Communities increasingly becoming more robust and more dynamic. Seeing the progress being made within the East African Community, for example, as well as the larger entities such as ECOWAS or COMESA or SADC, I am confident that the momentum is now unstoppable. The projected 3 billion people of Africa at that time will be more linked either having already attained or on the verge of a political union of some variant.

Regrettably, notwithstanding the repeated public declarations by African leaders of commitment to give priority to agriculture, this has not been followed up by concrete action. It is imperative that this must change. There is no reason why our continent with its immense fertile land and water resources should not be able to feed itself.

The low level of foreign direct investment in the manufacturing sector despite liberalization measures is sobering. On the other hand it is encouraging to note that there is a vigorous attempt to initiate a diversification of production systems – harnessing informatics, promoting more complex service industries and more importantly laying down the institutional and infrastructural foundation of modern economies.

At a socio-political level, the process of urbanization is increasingly picking pace. Projections are that by 2050 the majority of African people will be living in urban centres. This will have implications for diminishing primordial identities, increasing political awareness, fostering innovation as well as social integration. Of course, current evidence globally suggests that urbanization without a strong economic base will just shift and compound poverty to the city. The proliferation of slum and squatter settlements dotting the continent, even at this lower level of urbanization is not a good omen.

At the same time, the demographic and sociological transformations engender a politics of pluralism which has been becoming more intense in our continent over the last decade. Smooth transfers of power to the opposition has taken place in several countries and there is also a diminishing of unconstitutional takeover of state power. Moreover where such illegal takeovers have taken place they have been consistently and firmly challenged. Essentially, there is a new political dispensation emerging in the Continent, which is unlikely to be reversed in the long run. Obviously, we will go through a process of reconciling some initial contradictions as we move along the democratic trajectory.

It is my belief that the next decade will be critical in addressing electoral issues and governance; efficiency of the public services; the probity of the judiciary; the spectre of corruption; and the partnership of private, public and civil society. We are now at a very critical point on the political institutional dimension – but at least we have by and large passed through the violent phase and new norms and values are being internalized across society.

In terms of Africa's position in the global arena, the multi-polarity of a global system provides a good opportunity to reassert itself in the next decades and to gain its rightful position. Through forging strategic partnerships and galvanizing the Continent's internal potential - there is a strong possibility for Africa to be a strong player globally. It has all the hardware ingredients – dynamic and resilient people, resources, including energy; land mass; excellent weather. It is software which is so far deficient, and we seem to be on course in rectifying this anomaly.

Conclusion

I know I have painted a somewhat rosy picture towards the end, but it is a vision that I firmly believe that it is attainable. My hope and expectation is that in the not too distant future the world will witness an awakened Africa making full use of its economic potential, enriched by its diverse cultural values, effectively utilizing its immense wealth of natural resources such as minerals of all kinds, enormous agricultural and water resources as well as its human resources including the African Diaspora, for the benefit of its people and humanity at large.

I am an Afro-optimist. I sincerely believe that the strategic Pan African vision of African leaders like Osagyefo Dr. Kwame Nkrumah and Mwalimu Julius Nyerere will become a reality. *There will be a united states of Africa in the coming years.*