

Africa's Search For Purpose

In the 1960s African nationalists thought that only a united Africa could be a formidable force in the quest for global respectability.

Some of them believed in this ideal so much that they could not find meaning in the lone independence of their respective countries, "The Independence of Ghana is meaningless without the total independence of Africa," Kwame Nkruma said.

So did Ahmed Ben Bela of Algeria.

Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt believed the same in thought and action. And Sekou Toure of Guinea.

In similar light, Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere delayed the independence of Tanganyika on the basis that the still colonized Uganda and Kenya also needed to be freed from colonial rule. By the 1970s much of this solidarity had collapsed and Africa seems to have remained so ever since.

Following independence two diametrically opposing imperatives emerged.

While the nationalists were united in the belief that all of Africa needed to be liberated from colonial rule, they were not quite sure about what they wanted to do with it, like the popular band that sang, "now that we found love what are we gonna do, with it?"

Conflict always ensues when there is no clear purpose.

Two ideological camps emerged.

Those who saw themselves as "progressives" belonged to the Casablanca – Morocco, ironically – camp championing a single united African state.

They found a nemesis in those who saw themselves as “realists” who thought it was more important to secure sovereignty and enjoy the newly won state power.

Then, as now, the contention had more to do with those who saw themselves as potentially taking up leadership roles, whether the integration was at the continental level or at the regional, which practically became the watered-down outcome of the disagreements.

The bright lights of state power blinded most to the purpose of independence: bringing meaningful change in the lives of the African people.

It's fifty years later and this quest remains elusive. It was clear for everyone to see during last year's governance conference in Kigali: The Mo Ibrahim Forum.

The Mo Ibrahim foundation holds the Ibrahim Forum as a platform to engage on some of Africa's most pressing socioeconomic issues with particular focus on governance.

Last year's forum drew prominent African personalities, including Ivory Coast's Alassane Ouattara, who handed the award to Dr. Serleaf Johnson of Liberia.

Two separate scenes that took place during the event demonstrate the ideological split facing a people whose desire is to match in the same direction and speak in the same voice.

First, the well-received acceptance speech of the excellence in leadership honouree Serleaf Johnson.

Second, the equally news-making interview involving Mo Ibrahim himself and a journalist of France24 in a takedown that was also well-received given the rounds it was shared on social media. But there were other signals, too.

In her acceptance speech Serleaf outlined key achievements under her leadership. This was her legacy, how she wanted to

be remembered and how her biography is likely to read.

She spoke of how much progress had been registered in the promotion of democracy in Liberia, which she substantiated with a set of civil liberties along with the voice of a young man who had confronted her in the streets of Monrovia regarding a promise that her government had yet to keep.

For good measure, Serleaf also spoke of a young man in Georgia, USA, who had inspired her work as president.

She barely spoke of any policies, programmes, or activities for socioeconomic transformation impacting the material welfare of the people (the impact of her presidency on the lives of the Liberian people) during ten year tenure as president of Liberia.

Searleaf was not inspired by the young man in Monrovia who demanded of her material wellbeing.

However, she was able to draw inspiration from the young man in Georgia whose aspirations were identified by her record of neoliberal aspirations.

During the speech, it was difficult not to ignore the urge to recall the rebuke, "Africa doesn't need strong men; it needs strong institutions."

There was at least a third of the audience that would have wanted to hear how the lives of her people had been impacted by her presidency who took a bit longer to stand up for the ovation when the speech –excellently delivered and passionate –ended.

Meanwhile, on his first official trip overseas to Paris the incoming president of Liberia, George Weah, lamented the "political malfeasance" that had "depleted" Liberia, "I have inherited a country that is broke," he said. Weah was talking about the political economy of governance.

Now, the clip that went viral.

The scene involves Mo Ibrahim and Robert Parsons, a French24 journalist.

In it Mo is triggered by what he calls Western “hypocrisy” that expects African governments to live by a European standard that even Europeans have failed to uphold leading to outcomes of “illiberal democracy” in much of the European Union.

It’s a rebuke that identifies key socioeconomic indicators and efforts to transform people’s lives – especially a focus on transforming people from poverty – as central to any assessment of governance anywhere in the world.

Grasping this “social context” for governance needs to be respected before “Europeans start lecturing us about things without realizing that they live in a house of glass,” according to Mo Ibrahim.

A similar view is held by Dr. Donald Kaberuka, the former president of the African Development Bank, who earlier on in a panel discussing the context for public service delivery, had argued for the need to recognise social contexts that “demand for rights cannot rest on a subsistence economy.”

Desalegn Hailemariam, the immediate former Prime Minister for Ethiopia echoed Kaberuka’s nuance in broad terms.

Responding to a question about the circumstances of his resignation as Prime Minister, he underscored that much harm is done when analyses of governance and democratic reform are done outside of the “political economy” of socioeconomic transformation.

From experience “the political economy of poverty requires at least 7% growth to support democracy,” he elaborated to an attentive crowd of young and old selected from across Africa,

“a political economy of 3% growth cannot support democracy,” he said in reference to the importance of the socioeconomic imperative.

And so, here we have two theories of social change that are replicated across Africa and representing an ideological rift that is far from being paid attention to and tackled in efforts geared towards inculcating systems of common values needed to speak as one.

If independence is the body, the purpose is the soul. Without conviction, it's neither here nor there.