

OPINION AND ANALYSIS

The Arab Spring and lessons for sub-Saharan Africa

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I HAD the privilege of listening to Nobel Laureate Mohamed ElBaradei deliver the Thabo Mbeki Africa Day Lecture at the University of South Africa (UNISA) on May 25, 2015. The lecture, entitled ‘The Uprisings in North Africa and the Future of Our Continent’, was intellectually illuminating and nuanced. As a scholar, diplomat and former Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and former Vice President of Egypt, his views on Africa and international politics are cogent and authoritative.

ElBaradei’s take on the social, economic and political state of Africa is intellectually candid, iconoclastic and seminal. He eschews blame casting that tends to bog down some analyses on Africa’s current challenges and recognises Africa’s agency and compellingly argues that, if harnessed through decisive, committed and people centred leadership, can enable the continent overcome these challenges. Countries such as Botswana and Mauritius, to name but two, are proof that visionary leadership does transform societies.

ElBaradei traces the genesis of the uprisings in North Africa and other Arab Spring countries in response to people’s quest for “human dignity, a revolt against tyranny, poverty, and injustice and search for freedom, prosperity and justice”. In his address entitled, “A Conversation on Global Peace and Security” to an audience at the University of Johannesburg a day later on May 26 2015, ElBaradei observed that governments based on injustice, and that are disrespectful of the rule of law and divorced from the aspirations of the people invite use of extra constitutional means to get rid of them - “When the legal system does not serve you, you have to go the extra legal system,” he responded to a question from this author as to why he supported the toppling of Egypt’s first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi in a 2013 coup.

Tunisians, Egyptians and Libyans had been denied inalienable rights by autocratic systems, a state of affairs that alienated people from these states and which caused them to crack, and in the case of Libya, implode completely. I will accord a particular focus on Libya, a country that unlike Tunisia and Egypt has dissolved into unmitigated anarchy following the ouster of Muammar Gaddafi in

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2011. From ElBaradei's analysis our attention is drawn to the fact that Libya's decay began way before the invasion and forceful removal of Gaddafi, a position that flies in the face of a popular narrative that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) is solely responsible for the destruction of the country.

The role of external forces in Libya's current anarchic situation cannot be discounted but overemphasis on it without highlighting the fact that Libya was a repressive state under Gaddafi would be ahistorical. ElBaradei's poignant aphorism that "Stability without freedom is pseudo stability waiting to happen" unambiguously drives the point home. The citizens of the three countries may have led better standards of living than most of their counterparts in sub-Saharan Africa, but had to forfeit basic freedoms. So what superficially appeared to be stable polities were actually shaky political systems built on the quicksand of dictatorship, state sponsored violence, personality cultism, and economic and political marginalisation. Libya's attempt at state restructure is protracted and damaging because, unlike the other two countries, the rule of law and institutions pivotal to stability were utterly absent under Gaddafi.

ElBaradei has sobering words on the question of democracy and its connection to political stability, sustained economic growth and development. He mentions the issue of limits to presidential terms that threatens to plunge some African countries into civil strife. Embattled Pierre Nkrurunziza of Burundi, who nonchalantly plays football as security forces come down heavily on protesters and extra-judicially kill those opposing his unconstitutional third term bid, comes to mind. Paul Kagame of Rwanda, Joseph Kabila of Democratic Republic of Congo, and Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo Republic should submit to constitutionalism, if they care about the stability of their respective countries, as there are indications that they are keen on elongating their stay in power. Term limits are meant to institutionalise governance and do away with the 'life president' phenomenon emblematic of one party and military dictatorships. They are based on the understanding that longevity in power entrenches systemic atrophy, institutionalises sycophancy, and stymies plural politics. It is axiomatic that no single individual is indispensable as far the destiny of a given country is concerned. Indeed this is the case in any given human endeavour.

Africa's transformation, argues ElBaradei, depends on the rule of law and constitutions that meet international standards. As such, a culture in which incumbents tweak the Constitution with the help of malleable parliaments and weak judicial systems to suit their whims and caprices, is a recipe for instability. Strong institutions and not personal rule, in which the fate of a country is precariously hinged on that of the ruler, are a prerequisite to democratic consolidation. Integral to Africa's transformation is "...a system of governance that is inclusive, transparent and accountable, where the rules of the game including term limits are respected and not changed in mid-course".

ElBaradei reminds us that people are the greatest natural resource as opposed to natural minerals such as gold, diamonds, and oil and cites Singapore and Switzerland as models where states have progressed based on harnessing human resource despite not being endowed with precious stones and hydrocarbons. Thus African governments have to diversify economies, focus on energy, infrastructure, health, and above all, provide quality education to their citizens. No country has ever advanced while neglecting education.

Using a powerful simile, "we are like islands in the sea, separate on the surface but connected in the deep", ElBaradei shows how interconnected Africa and the world is a reality that clearly cautions against the futility of 'lone ranger' tactics, be it among African countries or in international politics

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especially at the United Nations and other multilateral organisations. Widespread suffering in the world, overspending on armaments at the expense of humanitarian assistance, peace keeping and poverty alleviation provide ample evidence to persuade ElBaradei to dismiss the UN system and other international institutions as anachronistic. These bodies therefore have to be restructured and reformed to be relevant because the world can ill afford dysfunctional institutions given the fact that humanity is confronted by transnational challenges that ElBaradei identifies as poverty, terrorism, climate change, weapons of mass destruction, communicable diseases, cyber attacks, human trafficking and illegal drugs.

Despite this reality, ElBaradei points out that a callous system in which “the sanctity of life depends on who is dying and where” reigns supreme. This approach to the world’s calamities is what Adekeye Adebajo refers to as “the aristocracy of death” and is manifested in what ElBaradei identifies as the apathy of rich countries to the plight of the poor, inequality in distribution of wealth among and within countries, persistence of poverty, uncontrolled violence, brutal repression and denial of human dignity. A combination of these factors renders the world insecure and explains the emergence of extremist groups such as Al Shabaab, Boko Haram, Ansa Dine, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and which operate on the continent.

At the University of Johannesburg, ElBaradei observed that the world, especially leaders of the powerful nations, shy away from asking why these extremist groups exist because the answers are self-incriminating. The world celebrates jobless economic growth that perpetuates inequalities, with little or no impact on poverty, and abets impunity but ironically gets surprised when social unrest and extremism erupt. Such was the situation in ElBaradei’s home country, Egypt, before the Arab Spring caught up with it.

ElBaradei’s message for sub-Saharan Africa is that factors that precipitated the Arab Spring such as poverty, inequalities, repression, lack of human dignity, suppression of human rights, exclusionary politics, corruption, patronage and lawlessness exist in this region and unless governments tackle these challenges and learn “to turn words into deeds and address the issue of implementation - making things happen” uprisings will ensue. Unrest in Burundi and in Burkina Faso bear testimony. No one is immune to the dire consequences of abandoning people to their own devices because as ElBaradei notes, “We will either swim or sink together.” There would not have been a more opportune time for two intellectually provocative speeches on South African soil days before the African Union holds its 25th Summit in Johannesburg from 7-15 June 2015.

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