

AFRICAN SOLUTIONS TO AFRICAN PROBLEMS

An analysis of the nature and origins of African problems



This imperial system has underdeveloped Africa by draining African wealth and by making it impossible to develop more rapidly the resources of the continent.

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Although the dynamics of global political systems and Africa's international relations are forever changing, the relevance and position of "African Solutions to African Problems" within the spheres of international politics remain a valid and defining factor of African diplomacy. The African Union (AU), sub-regional organisations and patriotic African scholars, whether on the continent or in the diaspora, are the significant players in the application of this principle. Today, as never before in African history, we witness countless debates surrounding the ability of Africans to understand the problems of the continent and provide solutions to them. Is this demand a myth or reality? African solutions necessitate the understanding of the nature of African problems and devising suitable

and/or sustainable solutions to them, as well as the capacity to implement in a practical manner.

The major task is to understand African problems by exploring their root causes. This is because any solution must derive from and address the root causes or it will not be sustainable. African problems can be triggered by innumerable issues, including: intractable conflicts; the culture and attitude of some African leaders (for example, of changing their constitutions to remain in power for life); deep-rooted poverty; outbreaks of uncontrollable diseases; the issue of African in Northern Africa drowning in the Mediterranean Sea as they run away from the continent; terrorism and terror wars in the Horn of Africa and West Africa; and xenophobia in some cities in South Africa. Such problems

raise many questions.

Many African problems have degenerated into full blown conflicts. African rulers and politicians are pointing out and emphasising that the best way of dealing with these conflicts is through a home-grown localised African solution.¹ The aim of this article is to critically examine the nature and origin of many of the most typical African problems, and how much these problems have impacted on the lives of Africans.

African problems: A critical inquiry

The origin of African problems is linked to the history of the Arab and trans-Atlantic slave trade; colonialism; the Cold War; and the US-led Global War on terror. These events had a tremendous impact on the mind and behaviour of African people. It is argued that slavery existed in Africa long before Europeans arrived, in the 1400s. However, Europeans introduced a form of slavery that devastated African life and society.² Scholars have estimated that 10 to 12 million Africans were forced into slavery and sent to European colonies in North and South America from 1520 to 1860. Moreover, many more Africans were captured but died of disease and/or of starvation before arriving.³

One major impact of the trans-Atlantic slave trade is derived from the fact that slave traders targeted Africans between the ages of 18 and 30. This, of course, robbed our continent of young people, very energetic, healthy, leaving behind their task of leading and developing their communities and families.⁴

Unfortunately, while these labourers were being sold, killed, oppressed and tortured, others were forcibly working for the building up and development of the first world states, Europe and USA in particular. European slave traders chose young, strong, healthy people, leaving a few weak and sick Africans behind to lead families and villages. A critical impact was that African cities, towns and villages did not have enough workers, and leadership structures and family structures were devastated.⁵ And yet the family remains the basic school where future leaders of a society and nation are nurtured.

Thus the trans-Atlantic slave trade created a great vacuum in terms of human development, political leadership, and economic development and this marked the start of African problems. For almost five hundred years Africa remained without strong and healthy workers who could have developed the continent. Literature depicts that the impact on the African people is still visible in the modern African person, in the way they behave, react, as well as the feeling of inferiority before a white person. It is argued that Africans tend to hate themselves and wish to be white (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013: 48).

He further argues that "African people continue to manifest the disease of mental colonisation which made them assist in the reproduction of a racially hierarchised world system". Arguably, this is the reason why Africans are today acting like confused people on the continent. Critical examples include the xenophobia attacks on their fellows Africans in South Africa, and the drowning in the Mediterranean Sea of those running away from the continent to Europe.

After the trans-Atlantic slave trade was abolished and made illegal, Africa and her people did not have a period of respite to recover from it and find solutions to the problems it had created on the continent. Moreover the European world which had devastated the continent did not see it important to help Africans, neither did it give them opportunities to recover from the wounds created by the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Instead, colonialism, which was a kind of foreign leadership, was introduced and imposed on Africa and her people by force. Hence, colonial and oppressive rule was established.

Through the introduction of colonial education, colonialism alienated African young people from their own cultures and undermined African traditions. Slowly, African people began to consent to colonial rule and to surrender the elements of their culture and traditions (Khapoya, 2012: 103). Against this backdrop, colonialism also taught European ways of thinking, which often conflicted with, and destroyed, African traditions. Yet African solutions must be rooted in

African cultures and traditions.

Problems caused by colonial legacies in political leadership and institutions are still rampant on the continent. Mazrui argues that the problems facing Africa are actually consequences of the presence of Western imperialism on the continent. There were no divisions and boundaries in pre-colonial Africa, and African people were united and lived together in groupings (Mazrui, 2012: 30). This means that the failure of African leadership we see every day is in fact the lack of a leadership that is rooted in African cultures. Thus, I argue that colonialism is still with us, embedded in the systems of political leadership on the continent.

Thomson (2000) notes that European imperial rule is inherent in the systems of governance in almost all the African states. This argument is confirmed by Ahmed Mohiddin (1998), who points out that immediately after independence, colonial authorities chose their collaborators and, wherever possible, imposed them on the people. These people have inherited the divide and rule system of governance from colonial masters till today. Therefore many of the first generation of African leaders were colonial collaborators in the sense that these leaders were created and supported by colonial authorities (Mohiddin, 1998). Thus, colonialism has continued and still devastates the continent in many countries through the current political leadership.

Consequently, the first generation of African leaders who assumed power in post-independence Africa acquired all the attributes of the colonial state and governance. In spite of the elections and promises of more freedom that preceded independence, the states continued to be unresponsive, unaccountable, lacking in transparency, and in most cases repressive (Mohiddin, 1998). Unfortunately colonialism continues to manifest itself in African political leadership today, which means that many African leaders have turned into tyrannical masters over their fellow Africans.

It is important to note that if structures in place are colonial, whether the leader is an African or not,

this leader would find it hard to do other than what the structures dictate. Thus, colonialism and its legacies made African problems endemic.

The other event that intensified African problems is the Cold War. It is important to know that while Africa was still suffering from the wounds caused by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, the Cold War did not spare her. Africa was devastated by the Cold War which had a tremendous impact on the continent. With two elephants (USA and USSR) fighting (including ideologically), Africa became the battle field for proxy conflicts and violence which were deadly in nature. While colonialism led to the emergence of African leaders who are colonial collaborators, the Cold War led to proxy wars and military coups on the continent. The Cold War created proxy wars, and also created proxy leaders.

The Cold War also destroyed the evolution of local ideology which sought to address local issues in an African way. In many parts of Africa, the Cold War led to the presence of warlords, criminal gangs, and paramilitary groups. Economies became fragmented; political power vacuums were created and left unsolved; ordinary people were discriminated against and denied the available opportunities (Schmidt, 2013: 193).

Instead of ethnicity being an opportunity for human growth and economic development, it became one of the deadliest triggers of conflicts, thus worsening African problems.

Another factor that is escalating and worsening African problems and making them more complex is the ongoing Global War on Terror. Nhema and Tiyaambe argue that the US-led 'war on terror' in Africa and other parts of the world is the liberatory logic of anti-colonial wars in that it is an imperial war in so far as it seeks to advance the agenda of the world's pre-eminent imperial power, the United States (Nhema and Tiyaambe, 2008). Aspects of this imperial war include the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al-Shabaab in Somalia.

Walter Rodney in his outstanding book *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* argued that the presence of

the imperial system embedded in the governance of many African states is by and large responsible for African problems. This imperial system has underdeveloped Africa by draining African wealth and by making it impossible to develop more rapidly the resources of the continent. He also demonstrated that western capitalism was extending its exploitation from Europe to include the whole of Africa.

Africans: their own enemies

The major problem that makes the continent vulnerable and the source of many other problems is the lack of political will and patriotism. Many African states lack total independence from their colonial masters. Such African leaders are still dependent on their colonial masters, and thus a proxy of external forces. They also lack that political will and patriotism that would make them love their own states and the continent as well. Ahmed says that many of the leaders on the continent are created and supported by the colonial authorities (Mohiddin, 1998).

Being created and established by the colonial masters means that the leader serves those who put him/her in power at the cost of Africans. Should I serve those who put me in power and continue to support me or the interests of Africans? Such 'puppet' leaders confront this dilemma. If they wish to retain power and privilege they will continue to serve the ex-colonial masters.

This has aggravated African problems and made the process of finding African solutions to African problems exceedingly difficult. Lack of political will and patriotism has led African leaders to turn into tyrannical rulers and dictators. These leaders impose themselves on the people, and remain in power for life.

This is another problem that has created resentment and led to the militia groups, rebellions, and retarded economic development which characterise many African states. For example, the current President of Burundi had recently refused to relinquish power, a decision that led to loss of many lives, and created refugee problems in the neighbouring states.

As with other many leaders on the continent, to succeed, he manipulated the judicial systems to organise his own general elections without any competitor, which he unashamedly called democratic, free and fair. The International Crisis Group (2016:2) report says that President Pierre Nkurunziza and his CNDD-FDD ruling political party decided "to do away with the institutional system established by the Arusha accord – an agreement between Hutu and Tutsi elites in 2000 which put in place an ethnic quota system for state institutions, including the army, and established a two-term presidential limit".

It is regrettable to note that many African leaders are perpetrators of the African problems. They condone and protect the unacceptable behaviour of their fellow leaders. For example, both the current president of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, and the facilitator in the Burundian crisis, former Tanzanian President, William Benjamin Mkapa, said the Burundian 2015 general elections were legitimate. These African leaders further said that there was no reason to question the legitimacy of president Nkurunziza. While the ICG report says that president Nkurunziza's third term is illegitimate and violated the 2000 Arusha peace accord, those African leaders said his third term is legitimate. Should one trust the ICG report or president Zuma and the facilitator's report?

One can see that President Pierre Nkurunziza's decision to run for a third term brought about violence and made it very difficult to find a more just and peaceful resolution to the conflict. As bad manners are infectious, the trend continues. For example, the likes of Kagame of Rwanda, Museveni of Uganda, Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo Brazzaville, and Joseph Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo, to name a few, have equally changed their constitutions to remain in power for life. Those leaders have no intention of serving the interests of their people or the continent, thus rendering African Solutions to African problems even more complex and elusive.

The issues of corruption, ethnicity, and bad governance perpetrated by Africans themselves cut across

the continent. In many African governments, leadership is based on tribalism and marred by corruption. For example, in Kenya, political parties are organised along tribal lines. It is said that a corrupt society begets corrupt leaders. This weakens the AU and makes it very hard to find African solutions, because the agency is made up of the very same African leaders who are the African problems. Hence, one can argue that Africans are their own enemies.

Conclusion

African problems are man-made and can be solved by men and women. There is a need to develop strong political will and patriotism on the side of Africans. There is a need to examine our attitude toward our continent and our respective countries. I imagine if 54 African states with one goal come together to understand our African problems, African solutions that could lead the continent to a higher level and free it from the current problems could be found in a very short period.

It is pertinent to note that countries in the North have recognised that Africans themselves must carry out the agenda of resolving their own problems. France, for instance, expressed the view that African states and the AU must make greater financial contributions for peace operations, and must take the lead in resolving problems that their continent is currently facing. This would necessitate the understanding of the nature and origin of African problems. It would also require Africans to have strong political will and patriotism, otherwise African solutions to African problems will remain a distant dream. ■

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