

**ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT OF SOUTH AFRICA, THABO MBEKI, AT THE OPENING OF THE AFRICA CONFERENCE ON ELECTIONS, DEMOCRACY AND GOVERNANCE**

Pretoria, 7 April 2003

Chairperson of the South African IEC, Dr Bam  
Interim Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union, Mr Amara Essy  
Distinguished Delegates  
Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to speak at the opening of this important conference. I am privileged to extend a special word of welcome to our foreign delegates and visitors.

This conference has convened to discuss the important issues of elections, democracy and governance.

Hopefully, the delegates and institutions that are gathered here, will define for all of us not just the meaning and importance of democracy, elections and governance, but also the philosophical underpinnings of these concepts, and situate them within the African experience and reality.

In doing so, we would proceed from the understanding that to arrive at a correct analysis of what elections, democracy and governance mean in the African context, we must closely examine the historical evolution of our nation-states and the formation of the different countries on the continent.

This history will reveal among others, the continuous interplay between power, legitimacy, democracy, governance and nation building. In turn, these would further tell us more about why elections, democracy and governance have evolved in the manner in which they did in Africa.

I think this would help the work of the institutions and people that have gathered here, our political parties, civil society and our societies as a whole, because we would look at some of the fundamental challenges in our countries that have impacted, both negatively and positively, on democracy, and confront these challenges in our programmes to build a democratic Africa.

The challenge to analyse and understand Africa arises in part because, understandably, many of us at these kinds of gatherings seek to assert the point firmly, that we are democrats. This leads to the propagation of a series of democratic musts drawn from political science textbooks.

Accordingly, we tell one another that:

- we must have multi-party political systems;
- we must have regular elections;
- we must limit the number of times anybody can be elected head of state or government;
- we must have Independent Electoral Commissions;
- we must allow international observers to observe and make judgements on our elections;
- we must have a strong civil society;
- we must have an independent Human Rights Commission;
- and so it goes on, one must after the other, at the end of which we all proclaim that we had a very successful conference. The problem, however, is that our successful conference may not have added one iota to the advancement and entrenchment of democracy on our continent.

Great Britain does not limit the period during which a person may hold the position of Prime Minister, to say nothing about the hereditary position of Head of State. It does not have an Independent Electoral Commission that conducts elections. It does not have an Independent Human Rights Commission. I have never heard of international observers verifying whether any British election was free and fair.

Instead, I have heard of observers visiting the United Kingdom during election time to learn about how democratic elections should be conducted. I presume that we send these students because, correctly, we agree that despite the things she is not called upon to do, as we are, Great Britain is a democratic country.

In a sense, the challenge we face is to understand why the rulebook of democratic musts applies unevenly as between ourselves and other countries of the North, such as Great Britain.

This requires as objective an understanding of African reality as possible, not for the purpose of abandoning the rulebook of democratic musts, but to answer the question concretely - how shall these rules be translated into practice.

I believe it also requires that we understand that the democratic system is a form of social organisation, and not one that is separate from and independent of other factors that combine to define any particular society. It is both a product of and exists within the context of the evolution of particular societies. By definition, it is based on and reflects the varied social forces and ideas that characterise any society. It is a supremely human creation.

Of course, we now face a challenging proposition by those who have gone to war against Iraq. Apart from the issue of weapons of mass destruction, they say they have taken up arms against Iraq to overthrow a dictatorship and transform that country into a democracy.

The proposition that is being proffered is that there can be such a thing as an imported and imposed democracy; in much the same way that one can force-feed a person on hunger strike. Presumably the argument is that whether a person ingests jollof rice voluntarily or does so because he or she is force-fed, the fact remains that they have eaten jollof rice.

I am not certain that the institution of a democratic system can be approached in the same way that we approach the consumption of jollof rice.

Writing about Uganda in his 1997 book, "Sowing the Mustard Seed", President Yoweri Museveni says:

"The basis of political affiliation at the very beginning of Uganda's independence was...opportunistic and sectarian, with divisions along religious and tribal lines. These divisions clouded the real issues and prevented the electorate from distinguishing between important issues and trivial ones.

"The interests and needs of the people were, therefore, not made a focal point because opportunistic, ideologically and politically backward politicians had so fragmented society that common interests were lost sight of. The peasant in Lango, northern Uganda, did not regard the peasant in Buganda as his ally: he was persuaded to believe that the Baganda were 'arrogant', while the Baganda were told that the Langi were 'primitive and cruel'. This atomisation of the masses into sectarian groups served the interests of the politicians who divided and ruled the people. Sectarianism gave them an automatic and cheap, exploitative political base. It was what philosophers call 'ideological obscurantism', which means obscuring the truth in order to serve the interests of a clique. Political awareness among the masses was anathema to this type of politician."

Writing of the ruling party, the UPC, President Museveni says:

"The UPC was largely composed of lumpen bourgeoisie, or what in Ghana were known as

'verandah boys'. They had no independent means and were not prepared to work patiently. The UPC leadership were generally an uncouth breed, anxious to get rich as quickly as possible using the state apparatus and regarding their own crude style of operation...as the virtue of 'political shrewdness'. Ideologically they were bankrupt and they were certainly unequal to the task of national emancipation."

The actions of this 'lumpen bourgeoisie' led to the coup d'etat led by Idi Amin in January 1971.

Of the army that Amin led, this is what President Museveni had to say:

"Having been given the wrong foundation by the colonialists, the so-called army was not even a proper army, but just a colonial levy of riflemen with a low level of education and literacy...Obote intensified the Ugandan army's tribal character and even failed to tackle the problem of low educational standards...On top of all this, the army became virtually a wing of the UPC...By 1970 the army had degenerated further into specific tribal cliques to the extent that a junior officer refused to salute a superior unless he belonged to the same tribe...(After a struggle among the northerners in the army) Amin emerged as victor, in the process murdering thousands of soldiers and civilians, mainly from Lango and Acholi. The main political problem at the time, therefore, was the army, which effectively prevented the country from attaining democracy."

In her own book published in 1970, "The Barrel of a Gun", the late Ruth First, a leader and activist of our liberation struggle, wrote:

"Who rules Africa under independence? What are the main elements in the chronic instability of these states? How is political power concentrated or dispersed, and why can the action of a small-armed group so effortlessly capture it? Why, thus, when there has been a blow at the top of the power structure, does it seem so irrelevant to the polity as a whole? What of the institutions of state, and in particular the management of the economy? What of the people, down below? Who is dispossessed by a coup; who raised to power? Was the conflict over who exercised power, or how it was exercised?"

Why does the army, and not some other group, play the pivotal role in new states? Who are the military men under their uniforms; whose sons and brothers? Do they represent distinctive social forces? The Dispossessed? Themselves alone? Do captains of the army hope to become captains of industry, or of commerce? What triggers the coup? Does the army act for inner army reasons, or for reasons that flow from the wider polity?"

Citing various instances of military takeovers, she wrote:

"Nigeria's First Republic collapsed, said General Gowon, because it lacked high moral standards. Nzeogwu, the young major who made that particular coup, talked in more fevered but comparable terms of a strong, united and prosperous Nigeria, free from corruption and internal strife. In the Central African Republic, Colonel Jean Bedel Bokassa's Revolutionary Council announced a campaign to clean up morals that would forbid drum playing and lying about in the sun except on Saturdays and holidays. Colonel Lamizana of Upper Volta said, 'the people asked us to assume responsibility. The army accepts.'"

Were the soldiers right! Have the African armies demonstrated that they are the unique repositories of the values of public morality in Africa!

In his 1999 book "Africa since Independence", Colin Legum categorises some periods in the history of our continent as the Romantic Period from 1939 to 1970, the Period of Disillusionment from 1970 to 1985, and the Period of Realism from 1988 onwards and the Period of Renaissance, which is the period towards the end of the last Century and the beginning of the 21st Century.

It may well be that there could be differences about this categorisation. Yet, it is useful for the purposes of closely analysing developments on our continent, as I have said, that had a

lasting impact on these questions that we are discussing at this conference.

If we were to borrow Legum's categorisation, we may describe the Romantic Period as an epoch that was characterised by high levels of optimism and confidence arising from the important advances that liberation movements throughout the world were making and the fact that many former colonies were gaining their independence.

This was also the case with the African countries, where colonisation was generally on the retreat. Clearly, the attainment of independence was important because it created the possibility for the African people to respond to the critical challenges of development.

We all know that before independence in many of our countries, colonialists exercised power and governance through brute force. It did not matter to them that they enjoyed no legitimacy among the indigenous people because they believed that they needed no such legitimacy.

At independence, the new rulers had to ensure that not only did they exercise power but that their governments were legitimate. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, for instance, the people, through the 1960 democratic elections, granted this legitimacy.

However, the elected government of Patrice Lumumba lasted hardly six months. It had won the enmity of some powerful western democratic countries, which then proceeded to sponsor a coup d'etat against the first and only democratically elected government of the DRC.

Ultimately this led to the assassination of Patrice Lumumba and the installation of the Mobutu regime, which came to define everything that was wrong in Africa. The western democracies had set a precedent for the anti-democratic coups that swept through the continent for decades.

Colin Legum says, "Between 1966 and 1993, there were sixty-three military coups in Africa and twenty-four violent conflicts. About ten million people lost their lives and at least five times as many were wounded in African conflicts. More than twenty million became refugees or were displaced from their homes in their own country."

We must ask ourselves the questions - does the fact that we are Africans make us prone to the anti-democratic violence conveyed by this history, or was it simply that we were not sufficiently educated to understand and implement the democracy rulebook!

We should draw some comfort from Legum's answer to these questions. He says:

"The (African) dream of a Golden Age had withered on the tender vine of independence, and it became clear that Africa was not going to escape the experience of Europe, the Americas, and Asia in comparable historical periods when they were evolving and consolidating their new nation-states.

"Many of the factors which destroyed the optimism of the period of romanticism in Africa were not very different from those in Europe - which had experienced its Hundred Years' War, Napoleonic conquest, assassinations, times of chaos...

"It was similar, too, in the Americas, with the fratricidal killings and the bitterness of the American Civil War; the racism of slavery; the corruption and miseries of the Reconstruction years; and in Latin America, where a succession of wars was fought over the shaping of borders; the rise of dictators and military regimes; oppression and widespread abuses of the human rights of the indigenous populations; and the failure of Simon Bolivar's ambition to unify Latin America. The wars and revolutions in Europe and the Americas exceeded in scale and casualties the violent episodes in Africa, bad as these were..."

And so we can breathe a sigh of relief that, after all, we have not been as bad as those who accuse us of being especially backward and primitive. This had led the African-American journalist, Keith Richburg, who reported on the 1994 Rwanda genocide for the "Washington Post", to write in his 1997 book, "Out of America", "thank God my nameless ancestor, brought

across the ocean in chains and leg irons, made it out alive (because, now, I am not one of them (the Africans). Thank God that I am an American."

Despite this, what Legum has written tells us that we can assert that history has absolved us. We must presume that the African-American, Keith Richburg remains proudly American, no longer an African-American, not one of us.

Be this as it may, the problem, of course, is that what is historical has been and gone. We live not in history but in the present. Our own history tells us that we must not do today what we did in the past, as during the era that Legum characterised as the Period of Disillusionment.

How not to repeat this Period requires that we understand fully the social phenomena described by Yoweri Museveni, and that we answer frankly the questions posed by Ruth First.

Who rules Africa under independence?

How is political power concentrated or dispersed?

What of the institutions of state, and in particular the management of the economy?

What of the people, down below?

Do the (men and women in military uniforms) represent distinctive social forces?

What triggers the coup?

Does the army act for inner army reasons, or for reasons that flow from the wider polity...(as happened a few weeks ago in the Central African Republic?).

If we answer these and other questions honestly and correctly, we will create the possibility for us to build stable democracies on our continent, and thus create the conditions visualised during what Colin Legum described as The Romantic Period, that will enable us successfully to tackle the urgent challenge of poverty and underdevelopment.

We are involved in the complex process of establishing the African Union. We are on the verge of the implementation of the Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development.

Neither of these historic initiatives will succeed if we do not answer correctly the questions posed by Legum's Period of Disillusionment. Perhaps the question we will have to answer first is whether we have the courage to answer these questions with regard to our states as they are and function today!

Is it possible for this important conference to pronounce itself on whether it believes the South African democratic system will survive into the medium and long term?

Would it have the courage and ability to ask?

Who rules South Africa after liberation?

Does that strange and predatory animal, the lumpen bourgeoisie, govern us?

Are the political affiliations at the very beginning of our liberation opportunistic and sectarian, with divisions along religious and tribal lines?

Is our country's political leadership ideologically bankrupt and unequal to the task of national emancipation?

Does this leadership have the capacity to manage the dynamic relationship between power, legitimacy, democracy, governance and nation building?

How is political power concentrated or dispersed?

What of the institutions of state, and in particular the management of the economy?

What of the people, down below?

Having answered these questions, would it be possible for this important conference to advise the South African people what they need to do to ensure that our own dream of a Golden Age does not wither on the tender vine of liberation?

Will you counsel us about how successfully to implement the rulebook of democracy in our specific conditions?

If this important conference cannot do these things, why should we describe it as an important conference! The prospect facing the people of Iraq should serve as sufficient warning that in future, we too might have others descend on us, guns in hand, to force-feed us with jollof rice.

What might come to be was honestly expressed by Charles Krauthammer who wrote for the "Washington Post" on March 21, 2003, South Africa's Human Rights Day. He said:

"There were wars and truces and treaties before the United Nations was created - as there will be after its demise. No need to formally leave the organisation, Mr President (Bush). Just ignore it. Without us, it will wither away."

Krauthammer obliges us to ask the question, if the United Nations does not matter and should be destroyed, why should we, the little countries of Africa that make up the African Union, think that we matter and will not be punished if we get out of line!

In his poem "Memories Break", Ben Okri has told us what we have done to ourselves in the past:

"We celebrate our future deaths  
We cut out the tongues  
Of our prophets  
We hail our murderers  
We gild our traitorous leaders  
We poison our healers  
And we walk with eyes wide open  
Into our own abyss.

Break this cycle  
Break this madness  
Let new fevers rise in this  
Radiant act of faith  
Destroy this temple of living hell  
Let us join our angers together  
Forge a new joy for the age.  
Create  
New breaks."