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AFRICA: IS THERE HOPE?

by

Ahmed I. Samatar

No Sweetness Here

--Ama Ata Aidoo, 1972

INTRODUCTION

Almost everything that comes out of Africa seems to unequivocally substantiate Professor Ali Mazuri's 1980 judgement that the ancient land is in the throes of "crises of habitability."

In the last few months, international television viewers and newspaper readers have been treated to horrifying glimpses of the carnival of hunger in Ethiopia. Unfortunately, the fate of most of the other states, particularly those south of the Sahara, is not that much better. As a matter of fact, latest reports from the continent speak of more than 180 million Africans in 27 countries that are suffering from various degrees of starvation.

In such circumstances, then, it seems imperative to confront the following question: How and why has Africa come to such an incalculable humiliation and grief? For, while sensitizing people to contribute to immediate relief operations is laudable, an understanding of Africa's debilitating ailment, and suggestions towards a remedy, requires serious cogitation. In the few pages that follow, an attempt will be made to outline a precis that lays bare how this condition came to pass, a thought or two towards an historical alternative, and some concluding remarks.

THE NATURE OF THE CRISIS

Ecological Degradation

Even in the developed countries of the world, the indispensability of a protected and healthy ecological base is now a major part of political discourse and decent living. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about Africa. In fact, a measure of the magnitude of the environmental degradation so prevalent in the continent can be easily gleaned from the following: In the Ivory Coast, 450,000 hectares of forest are lost every year; and in North Africa, the desert is gaining ground at the rate of 100,000 hectares every year. Put

another way, over 8 million hectares of tropical rain forest vanishes every year, or 20 hectares every minute of every day.

According to agronomist Rene Dumont, in his latest and most compelling book, Stranglehold on Africa, this neglect and undermining of the environment through deforestation, overgrazing, and loss of fallow land compounds the denuding natural powers of such forces as wind and water. Immediately more serious, however, this acute destruction of the ecological foundation that is so pervasive across Africa has added to the crippling of agricultural production and the capacity of the continent to even feed its own people.

The Involution of the Economy

Perhaps no other ensemble of African life so glaringly underlines the derangement of the continent than the crisis of food and, consequently, the failure to produce. It is here than in any other area that one wakes up to the iron face of Africa's great human tragedy.

Let us look at some figures: In 1940, for example, Africa's agricultural productivity was such that the continent was a net exporter of cereals. Ten years later, in 1950, food production was enough to meet local needs -- i.e., self-sufficient. However, by 1976, the continent was a net importer of cereals to the tune of 10 million tons; in 1978 this figure was 12 million tons, and rose to 16 million tons for 1980. If these debilitating processes continue, projections are that by 1990, African food needs could be so immense that the import bill will rise to nearly 45 million tons of cereals. What is very germane to note here is that despite this horrifying deficit, Africa is still supplying the rest of the world with export crops (e.g., cocoa, groundnuts, coffee) and raw minerals (e.g., copper, gold, diamonds, uranium, and oil). The tragedy of export crops is that in addition to their cultivation alienating more and more land from small peasants who have traditionally produced food and, therefore, pushing millions of them into towns, the prices for these commodities depend on the shifting rhythm of the international capitalist market. It is now common knowledge that the disparity between the world prices of African cash crops and minerals, and the commodities imported from the industrial capitalist world, (e.g., farm inputs), have grown so wide that African producers would have to more than triple their exports today to secure the same amount of inputs they purchased more than a decade ago -- the consequence of the infamous unequal exchange practice.

In fact, even the case of the highly celebrated oil producers' cartel (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries -- OPEC) demonstrates the inherent exploitative

nature of international trade relations between the Third World and the developed capitalist countries. For instance, in 1970, the Iranians had to sell three barrels of crude oil to import the quantity of industrial goods (durables) that they bought for one barrel of crude oil twenty years earlier. Put differently and contemporaneously, though the international price for a barrel of oil sounds very high -- from \$2 per barrel in 1972 to \$36 in 1981, it is not that impressive when seen in its actual (minus inflation) terms. Indeed, the World Bank -- that apostle of international capital -- calculates that the real rise of crude oil was from \$2 a barrel to \$12.

Since Africa's production of basic foods has declined so dangerously, and cash crops are also unable to fetch "good" prices that would enable the continent to buy food from the outside, mortgaging the country and begging have become one of the few ways to sustain what is left of life in Africa. The degree of this dependency to external forces and the resultant vulnerability is symbolized by the huge debt that the continent owes to the world -- especially the West. In this regard, 1984 estimates put Africa's debt burden at around \$150 billion -- a figure that assumes awesome proportions when juxtaposed against an average per-capita income of about \$250.

In short, this crisis of the material base not only spreads the traditional "kwashiorker" (protein deficiency), undergrids the present day disasters of continental "marasmus" (100 percent calorie deficiency), and creates an unplanned and chaotic rush to urban centers -- particularly capital cities, but it also ushers in an acute and chronic reduction of national surpluses that, in turn, injects a savage and brutish struggle into the crucial realm of governance and politics.

The Trauma of Politics

Since the state, the pivotal structure of decision-making, is a sine qua non for the development directions a particular society embarks upon, the shrinkage of the economic base of Africa has made the competition for state power more intense and fierce than in other parts of the world. This struggle for survival, so gruesome among elites, has pitted various social forces against each other, culminating in voracious intra-nationality and class confrontations, often breaking the bounds of any reasonable and rational definition of politics. For example, Chad, from the inception of its nominal independence in 1960, has plunged into a devastating civil war with class, religious and nationality dimensions. In Ethiopia, there are at least four major internal wars raging at this writing.

Perhaps no other evidence captures more of the essence of the crisis of governance in Africa than the following two facts: First, nearly half of the African states are now run by highly repressive and malignant military regimes, with no provisions for any civilian participation. Secondly, next to the Middle Eastern countries, Africa is the fastest growing arms importer in the world. For example, Ethiopia's military consumption is over 143 percent of the total non-military budget, or over 10 percent of its Gross National Product (GNP). In neighboring Somalia, the figures are 65 percent and 17 percent respectively.

These two factors combined not only aggravate the economic crisis, but also give African politics a heinous and toxic ambience, a texture of militarism, and encourage gross violations of human rights. Further, such conditions reinforce both the gravity of the underdevelopment processes elucidated earlier, and the proneness of African societies to superpower and ex-colonial imperialist manipulations. Given this array of problems, is Africa's fate sealed? We think not. Rather, it is our contention that the concept of self-reliance can be a source of hope and change.

THE ALTERNATIVE OF SELF-RELIANCE

Self-reliance can be perceived both as a strategy and a description of an end to be striven for. As a strategy, self-reliance is to be seen as the sum of specific activities, undergrid by a set of injunctions and precepts, that are undertaken to move a community from a condition of high vulnerability and assailability to a less exposed and more autonomous direction. More specifically, such a national effort will involve a restructuring of domestic institutions to empower the majority of the society to embark on development activities congruent with their needs; simultaneous steps to selectively loosen the vise of existing global patterns of dominant economic, political, and military relations, and a commitment to increased cooperation with social forces (or states) of the same orientation and proclivities -- i.e., collective self-reliance. As an end, self-reliance captures the sedimentation of the results of the procedure, in the form of tangible socio-economic structures, in a moment in time. In other words, it denotes a state whereby the ideas and vectors of underdevelopment -- neo-colonialism and inept ruling classes -- have been demonstrably challenged, and an alternative has been conceived.

Of course, as can be inferred from the above line of thinking, the strategy for and the making of a self-reliant political economy assumes or presupposes the presence, on the historical stage, of social forces ready to appropriate the

value of the method, fastidiously capable of adapting it to the vicissitudes of the times, while vigilantly nurturing its basic principles and outcomes. Without such dedicated human forces behind it, the alternative is doomed to vaporize into the realm of rhetoric and wishful thinking. In the present African terrain, then, the natural constituency for such an undertaking appears to be a tight coalition among the subaltern and marginalized classes -- e.g., peasants, workers in urban areas, and progressives in the intellectual and even the business worlds -- in other words, the establishment of a popular national front.

To be sure, the operationalization of the general directives for self-reliance are neither easy nor immune to the vagaries of the particularities of African societies. Nonetheless, concretization and the marking of the trajectory of what is to be done are inescapable if ameliorative change is to generate its own enduring momentum and, in its wake, offer those engaged more spaces to maneuver. In this connection, it is imperative to understand that such favorable circumstances will have a chance of being born only if courageous and transforming policies are informed by a strong sense of realism. Devoid of sobriety, the danger exists for misinterpreting the symptoms of the crisis, adopting cavalier and adventurous methods, and inflating hopes and expectations.

To start then, the building of the new future will include the following naturally checkered initial steps:

INTERNAL RECONSTRUCTION

Politics

In reshaping political power and practice, a return to the recognition -- primarily through education -- of the individual as the core of any community is indispensable. A philosophical and practical acknowledgement of this, we hasten to add, does not mean the enshrinement of the old atomistic individualism. On the contrary, it suggests the development of the social individual; an individual who awakens to his/her historical responsibility, by way of introspection and self-definition, and through the labor and joy of partaking in covenantal and communitarian politics -- the essence of citizenship.

Beyond the confirmation of the citizen's rights and obligations, the creation of a vanguard party is the next step. It will be a terrible mistake to interpret this, a priori, as a mechanism and license for concentrating power in the hands of a few, and stultifying democratic aspirations -- consequently degenerating into despotic rule. Rather, our

conception of a vanguard party emphasizes the sanctity of both sides of "democratic centralism." For notwithstanding Western ideological antipathies, there are no inherent and intrinsic contradictions between genuine participation and a single party political system. What is of real significance is that not only the various sub-entities or intermediate organizations of the society, such as peasant associations, labor unions, and women and student groups, adhere to full debate and discussion, but that the over arching party institutions are likewise accountable and bound by the same principles.

It is reasonable to assume, then, that if such directives are gingerly followed and tenaciously honored, the dialectic between values and social institutions becomes less difficult to deal with. For the internalization, especially by the majority of the community, of such principles not only enhances members' senses of political and social efficacy, but also helps sustain the legitimacy and, consequently, the vitality of these very institutions.

The Economy

To buttress the political programme, certain socio-economic initiatives are necessary. To begin with, to contain erosion and desertification, a deep and resolute sensitivity and reverence towards the environment must be immediately cultivated. Some practical steps that should go along with changing attitudes towards the eco-system are the replenishment of forests and trees cut for energy and other uses, intensive rather than extensive farming methods, and the optimum use of locally available humus.

Secondly, the state should take ownership and control of basic producers goods industries and financial institutions. This process need not be promulgated overnight -- especially as present African societies do not have the wherewithal to compensate private owners or the skilled manpower to manage these institutions. In the interim, however, the goal of state control can be pursued through gradual but consistent policies of co-determination. It is of utmost importance to add here that the ensuing public ownership does not have to be arresting of the vitality and solvency of these economic units, nor undermine their role as pivotal sources of national capital accumulation. Moreover, there should be enough room to accommodate small private ventures, perhaps with a strict capital ceiling.

Thirdly, the establishment of cooperatives that control their own property, especially at the local level, must be promoted. Furthermore, agricultural policies that give special priorities and incentives to producers of food (e.g.,

farmers in both cooperatives and small private holdings) must be enacted. Obviously, this could mean higher food prices, but part of this can be obviated by re-directing public expenditure -- for example, from military outlays to subsidies of inputs to agriculture. In addition, the stimulation of the rural sectors could create demand for local industrial products.

Fourthly, the egalitarian tendencies of the new order must be demonstrated by, among others, the reduction of income differentials, which are currently around a ratio of 1:30.

Finally, the introduction of a central planning mechanism seems warranted. However, such a step must not be turned into a tool to totally block markets or falsify price relations by sheer bureaucratic edicts. Rather, while the plan becomes a guide for, among other things, the forecasting, directing, and coordinating of economic decisions, particularly those of macro-economic nature, the market would have to be accepted as an important partial mediator of democratic micro-economic choices.

EXTERNAL ACTIVITIES AND COLLECTIVE SELF-RELIANCE

First, a promise to gradually but persistently reduce dependency on the Western capitalist trading system is a major component of external actions commensurate with the struggle against chronic vulnerability. Self-reliance in this sense means taking real notice of the vertiginous effects that result from an extraverted economy -- one whose dynamism relies on dominant and capricious external markets. Concretely, while such a cognizance does not imply impulsive and sudden introversion, it does require, however, a vow and willingness, based on planned and carefully thought out actions, to disembroil the society from the network of international capitalism. Given such a consciousness, and the adverse impact of the production of export crops in place of food, the concentration of trade in a few markets, the importation of unnecessary luxury goods and inappropriate technology, and the chronic borrowing from the very source of dependency, the re-thinking of trade relations becomes compelling. It is plausible, therefore, that if other steps, such as those listed earlier and the ones to follow, are put into place, trade re-organization need not be a hopeless affair.

Secondly, the delinking of military relations with external powers is a requirement. The execution of such a policy will spare African states the existential menace that results from being part of imperialist strategic calculations. Furthermore, it is very feasible that such a resolution would

deprive the local militarists their most vital source of influence and, in the process, unburden the society from economically wasteful war machines.

Thirdly, commitment to collective self-reliance could deliver Africans -- at the moment caught up in petty sub-nationalist and hackneyed nationalist ambitions -- from the traps of the nation-state concept. These tactics of divide and rule, so effectively deployed by the colonizers at an earlier period, are now part of the equipment used by imperialists and their collaborators to preserve divisiveness, as Africans are instructed in the inviolability of the nation-state. In order to successfully challenge imperialism, and overcome Africa's endogenous source of fragmentation, collective self-reliance must be pursued. An effort of this kind would open up new avenues for economic cooperation (or integration), common security designs, and, most significantly, present an invitation to conceive the millennial project for the re-enchantment of Africa, through the monumental rising of its peoples. In addition, collective self-reliance would help Africans make a more reliable distinction between plunderers and racists, and sympathetic and counter-hegemonic forces around the world -- such a barometer is a life-saver in a world-system inhabited by many predators. In that vein, the wise words of Stephen Marshall (1641), spoken in the context of the beginning of another epoch of change, seem worth recalling, "...you have great works to do, the planting of anew heaven and a new earth among us, and great works have great enemies..."

THE QUEST FOR SELF-RELIANCE

At this juncture, then, two questions need to be addressed: What is the verdict on the few African states that espouse similar principles (socialist); and how realizable is such a strategy in Africa? Before we proceed, however, it is important to note that no single book, let alone a brief article like this one, could hope to encompass the complete theory thoroughly nor deal with all the issues -- including the evaluation of more kindred experiences -- thrown up by the African situation. Rather, what has been offered are some suggestive pointers towards strategizing for purposive confrontations with the prevailing disorder.

Briefly, then, there are very few African countries that have boldly enunciated their adherence to a strategy of development similar to the one adumbrated here. Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania, and Ethiopia come to mind. While some tentative gains have been made by all of these countries -- especially in education, health care, and the disinheritance of traditional owning classes -- their overall record is far

from glorious. The reasons are legion. With the exception of Tanzania -- and even here it is not totally true, given Tanzanian intervention to dislodge Idi Amin -- all of these states have been subjected, from the onset, to ongoing external and internal attacks, and destabilization tactics. Mozambique and Angola, for so long under the uncubus of Portuguese colonialism, are the continuing victims of intensive South African aggression; and a decade of independence has not brought a single day of peace to attend to self-reliance. Ethiopia, ten years after the collapse of the feudal order, is still in the midst of many internal wars -- some heavily supported by outside interests. Moreover, almost all of these countries have yet to find the agreeable regional atmosphere to lay the basis for less rhetorical and more authentic collective self-reliance.

Besides these mostly exogenous factors, however, all four experiences have run into severe internal difficulties. Foremost among these are the lingering hold of archaic social structures and habits, and the loss of direction due to internal relapses. In the case of the latter, for instance, Ethiopia's moment for a more promising start was commandeered by the military; and Tanzania's bureaucratic elites have resisted genuine devolution and decentralization of economic and political power. In short, while some moves have been made towards self-reliance, there are gigantic struggles ahead for all these countries.

What does this say about the feasibility of self-reliance in Africa? It is the belief of this author that such an approach -- the mighty obstacles notwithstanding -- is one of the very few alternatives (if not the only one) that could give African peoples a chance of ever stepping out of the muck of the prevailing conditions. What else is there? A continuation of the ugly past and the cruel and demeaning present?

All of this, of course, does not imply that the strategy will be easy. On the contrary, it is bound to attract condemnation, sabotage, and even intervention from those who have traditionally benefitted from Africa's defeats; it is bound to earn the wrath of Africans who have used the misery and degradation of their own people to their personal short-term interests. Furthermore, even among the vast majority whose welfare is the main concern, the future will be very demanding, laborious, and replete with calls for individual and collective sacrifice. For liberation, as the biblical story of Exodus and its modern variants teach us, involves not only the difficult task of leaving Egypt behind, making the trek across the inhospitable wilderness, but also, perhaps more importantly, persevering in the face of the

enormous chores of transition -- thus, the possible creation of a more habitable Africa.

CONCLUSION

The preceding paragraphs have tried to describe the unfolding African condition, propose an alternative, and speak to its possibilities. In these concluding statements, we will recapitulate some of the most crucial factors that coagulate together and stand between the African masses and the project of liberation.

There is very little doubt that some of the responsibilities can be attributed to natural catastrophes, such as droughts. This is especially so when rains fail in rain-fed agricultural communities or pastoral societies -- the vast majority of Africa's population. Beyond this, however, the two most nefarious factors at play are: First, the envelopment and consequent nature and logic of the international capitalist system; and, secondly, the ruling classes of Africa (including non-military groups). The first has responsibility partly because of its earlier rapacious and primitive accumulation needs. This compulsion in Western European development and subsequent expansion was partly satisfied by the pillage of Africa through slavery and colonization. Moreover, international capitalism currently plays havoc with the continent -- and other Third World regions -- by way of such exploitative trade arrangements as transfer pricing, profit repatriation, debt repayments, and unequal exchange -- all potent imperialist mechanisms to suck surplus value from the periphery (Africa) to the metropolises of global capitalism.

African elites and ruling classes are also significant culprits in this tragedy because, incubated in the interstices of imperialism and reared as its adjuvants, they have proven to be venal, insipid, socially irresponsible, and bereft of any consciousness of even their own historical role as robust ruling classes -- consequently, their manifest delinquent behavior and deliquescent status. This is particularly poignant as their own reproduction has become highly precarious.

On the whole, the African continent has been profusely hemorrhaging for quite sometime. The parade of hunger and wail of destitution and marginalization that has recently captured the pity of the world are cruel symptoms of Africa's conjunctural and structural condition. Conjuncturally, because its ruling elites have failed in their leadership roles; and, structurally, because Africa, for the past four centuries, has been subjected to the merciless hands of

capitalist and imperialist exploitation. In the end, for the continent to have any future, both of these deleterious factors must be abnegated. For it is only by breaking out of these chains that there can be any chance of opening up new vistas for action.

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