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On Africa and Classical Liberalism

By
Ali N. Mohamed

Many African scholars may take issue with the suggestion that we should look inward to find the source of the continent's social, political, and economic muddles. But the majority of the countries in sub-Saharan Africa remain deprived of the exponential growth in social and economic spheres that the rest of the world has experienced during the last three decades.

If we accept the premise that economic, social, and political systems are closely intertwined, an argument could be made that all the high-sounding proclamations made in the name of the search for progress in Africa since independence in the early 1960's have been seriously misdirected. This assertion is true for those who subscribe to a market economy as well as those who believe in a centrally planned economy.

Africa's failure is endemic to a common and peculiar style of state and government. As the present historical disintegration of Marxian socio-economic systems reaffirms, a straight commitment to a macrosociological agenda betrays a flawed perception of human nature. Africa may not have gone Marxian, but like communists, governments throughout the continent have shown a uniform aversion to the fundamental tenets of the classical liberal tradition. Individuals are written off in the search for development. There is an assumption that a commitment to individual liberties will always translate into social disharmony. With a few exceptions, not even a semblance of a balance between individual and societal rights is attempted. Most of us have known some form of subordination that stifles both economic ingenuity and intellectual growth. While the concept of a societal agenda is itself neutral theoretically, in practice it serves as a catalyst for numerous forms of abuse. It enables political elites to have a monopoly on *Truth* in the name of society's common good. And this is the principal reason why our political elites seem addicted to the phenomenon of the one-party system. It may be curious to some that, whereas in Western democratic systems political clout extends from economic clout, in Africa it is the other way around. African political elites become the economic elites precisely because of their rejection of classical liberal principles that diminish the role of authority and exalt that of the individual.

The root cause of political repression in the continent is therefore not ideological as some would argue, but a struggle for power for the sake of power and, consequently, economic clout. This is the case even

in pro-Western countries such as Somalia and Burundi where gruesome massacres of civilians took place recently. It is imperative that we understand that there is no ideological battle between the Hutu and the Tutsi in Burundi, the Shona and the Matabele in Zimbabwe, or the Somalis in the north and those who control the government in the south. The conflicts are purely over who will have political control in order to impose their will on the rest. It is no coincidence that in this social and political climate, the scourge of tribalism most readily thrives. And what it promotes in the long run is that individuals attain status not by achievement but by ascription--the blueprint for stagnation and regression.

It is time, therefore, that Africans sought genuine intellectual and economic freedom. Because we attained these freedoms at a general level with political independence, we must now seek it for individuals. The sooner we do this the better. The stakes are simply too high to remain fatalistic in the face of this predicament, for the alternative is to remain condemned to perpetual failure.