

ADDRESS

STATE OF THE BLACK WORLD CONFERENCE #
5

GLOBAL AFRICANS RISING:
EMPOWERMENT, REPARATIONS & HEALING

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 19, 2023
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND

Mr. Chairman

Distinguished Participants

Salutations

It is my privilege to be the opening pitcher at this historic conference, as your 5th Conference, seeks to realise Marcus Garvey's mandate for a global conversation, geared towards a strategy for "Empowerment, Reparations and Healing."

INTRODUCTION

Our deliberations on democracy and development are but another manifestation of the pursuit for freedom and agency in which our forebears engaged.

As the descendants of those who were colonized in Africa, and those who were forcibly brought to the Americas, we have an extraordinary legacy to guide and animate the work we must do. This is a bequest by those who remained remarkably true – to retaining and expressing their humanity in its fullest dimensions.

Our ancestors understood that 'emancipation' conferred freedom in an important but yet in only a narrow sense.

Those who were engaged in the anti-colonial movement, fully understood that the political departure of the colonial masters was an essential step – but only a solitary step on the journey to inclusive societies genuinely responsive to the needs, interests and aspirations of each and every inhabitant.

All of this applies with especial potency in the mission to transform post-colonial societies in Africa and the Caribbean. From this history, we gain an insight, and we define a challenge. The insight is an understanding that **the modern pursuit of democracy and development reflects nothing more than the yearning of our forebears for freedom and agency.**

The challenge is for us to **build inclusive societies, anchored by equal rights and justice for all, and encompassing social, economic, and environmental progress** – nothing less than a sacred trust from the past!

FRAME

It should not escape our notice that the Athenian concept from which democracy originated excluded women.

The YORUBA tribe had long before evolved their own patterns of indigenous democratic rule, OMOLAUBI, with several layers of governance and tribal accountability.

“We the people” in the American declaration of Independence, did not regard “slaves” as persons but instead as “property” or “things”

“Government by the people, of the people, for the people”
(Abraham Lincoln) President Clinton, I hear him saying, It all depends on what you mean by people.

I prefer (“Ubuntu” – “I am because we are”)

We the sons and daughters who come from the cradle of human civilization, Africa, have been victims of the Black experience worldwide. It has for centuries been one of slavery, colonial rule and the fight for our common humanity – all predicated in the fiery furnace of racism, fuelled by insatiable greed of Empire and the New World plantocracy.

In framing remarks on “democracy and development”, let me at the outset declare my refusal to do so through the traditional and self-serving prism of the Western World. The litmus test of democracy should not be determined by whether the Leader chosen in free and fair elections is acceptable to Western eyes or subscribes to the precepts of a capitalist state.

Reliance according to the Western scorecard would allow the perpetrators of the most reprehensible atrocities to colt the game rather than permit our full examination of the past to be used in creating a realistic understanding of the huge obstacles which we in Africa, the Caribbean and Latin America must remove to exercise our full sovereignty in the only planet which all mankind must share.

Sound judgement is based on what you practice: not by what you preach.

Where is the firm commitment to democracy by the Powers that proclaim it when Patrice Lumumba in the Congo or Salvador Allende in Chile, freely elected by their citizens, is assassinated by covert intelligence and replaced by brutal dictators who immediately gain endorsement and material support from the metropolitan powers?

We find it incompatible with the assertion that in a true democracy every vote should have equal weight when Legislatures in the Southern States of the U.S.A., which still control their separate electoral systems, distort the popular will by the delineation of boundaries and the configuration of the voting process to effectively disenfranchise or disempower huge swathes of the population based on race, colour and class.

Democracy cannot thrive where the rule of law does not exist.

We are bewildered by the confusing signals on the “rule of law” and the independence of judges within the “separation of powers”, when we observe the exercise of the right to appoint Judges to the Supreme Court and Federal Courts of Appeal, drawn exclusively from an ideological list compiled by an avowedly partisan group.

So one President during a single term can appoint a majority to the Supreme Court and reverse decisions hallowed by precedent while his predecessor is blocked by the Senate from exercising the right to fill vacancies during his tenure?

Brothers and Sisters,

We all regard the protection of fundamental human rights as sacred to any democracy. We do not, however, concede that any country elsewhere can arrogate the right to unilaterally index their application within our domestic borders in order to use its considerable voting power within international lending agencies to approve loans or funding projects for our development.

Police brutality and murders can never be justified – It still was somewhat of a seismic shock to read that my country's rating was being reviewed "because of the numerous reports of arbitrary and unlawful killings and complaints of abuse by the Police."

{Give me a break} – So what of the United States?

Don't misunderstand – I too am deeply perturbed at this and severely deplore it.

But please, spare us from the pontification. Help us instead to prevent this. Gun violence is now a public health crisis which breeds gangs and organized crime that threaten the security of the Nation State itself.

I have alluded to these instances for clear, specific reasons –

- (i) The dominance of the hegemonic force and influence of the USA in the global space and how that impacts on our democracy and development in Africa, the Caribbean and Central America.

(ii) Secondly, that global Africa must entail the full inclusion of the Diaspora and evoke the call of Marcus Garvey in 1920 to organize as one for the anti-colonial and civil rights struggles we face, no matter where we reside.

That is what this Conference is all about. For we, as the legendary Peter Tosh reminded us –

“Anywhere you come from. If you are a black man, you are an African”

Global Africa cannot remain silent or indifferent whenever there is a threat to the democratic process for its children or any impediment to their full development no matter where they reside – on the Continent, in the Caribbean Islands, the United States or Brazil.

The 54 countries which comprise the African Union and the 14 nations in Caricom have had their fill of the arrogant sermons that others know better what is good for us.

All we ask is the innate right to release our creative ingenuity and mobilize the collective will to carve our own destiny; to provide a better way and standard of life to attain even the modest millennium goals within an equitable and just world order.

HAITI

There is a tragic paradox which this 5th World Conference dare not ignore. The first Black Nation in this hemisphere which won its independence on the battlefield and simultaneously declared the abolition of slavery, is now the poorest and least developed in the Americas!! How come?

The bold and revolutionary martyrs paid with their lives. But for centuries thereafter, France with the strong endorsement of the United States and their European counterparts, extorted from the impoverished Haitian Treasury, billions to compensate for the crushing defeat of Napoleon's army and the deprivation of enslaved labour for France.

There followed the neo-colonial exploitation, the repeated foreign interventions, the overthrow of democratic regimes. The tragedy, that becomes more acute and obdurate in a Caricom member state with each passing day, reveals the hypocrisy of those who tout democratic values and yet stifle it according to their own narrow self interests.

Democracy will remain an unfinished project, and development an elusive aspiration in the Hemisphere so long as violence and chaos remain pervasive in Haiti.

Civil order must be restored with an electoral process to choose Haitian leadership that derives its legitimacy from the people themselves and which is responsive to the needs and interests of a nation – which lit the flame for those who believe in freedom and liberty of the human spirit everywhere.

TRENDS

Recently, there have been setbacks in a trend over several decades towards democratic expansion and deepening on the Continent of Africa. Almost 70% of the Continent's population live in a country where the security and rule of law environment was worse in 2021 than it was a decade ago. Since 2020, there have been unconstitutional changes of government in at least 5 African countries, four of them in West Africa. The fundamental rights and freedoms which underpin political pluralism, civil liberties, and citizen engagement in open and progressive societies seem to be undergoing a measure of unwelcome constriction in some countries.

The influential Ibrahim Index of African Governance has found that governance in the Continent is threatened by worsening

security and backsliding in democratic processes and civil participation.

We have seen increased conflict with ethnic and religious roots in the Horn of Africa and in West Africa. In the western Sahel region, some two and a half million people have been displaced over ten years because of social and political instability.

There are in existence foundational instruments such as the **African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance**

(ACDEG) and the **ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance.** These are consensual documents which seek to promote accountability, encourage democratic institutions, and ensure free, fair and credible elections as the basis of legitimate government.

With some seventeen African countries scheduled this year to hold national elections, 2023 could be an important stress test, reflected in **Agenda. 2063: The Africa We Want** – “an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law.”

SCRAMBLE

Almost a century and a half after the Berlin Conference, we can still discern the toxic penumbra of that mind-set which informed the shameful 'Scramble for Africa'. Powerful global players continue to seek to determine the political and economic priorities of the emerging continent, and to embroil African countries in divisive and debilitating geo-political and geo-economic competition and conflict, from Ukraine to China. International competition to secure access to Africa's strategic mineral and energy resources is increasing, especially as European countries seek to lessen their own dependence on traditional suppliers within their continent.

From the **health pandemic** with its accompanying vaccine nationalism and supply chain disruptions; to **climate change**, with its mitigation and adaptation requirements, and the imperative for low carbon transition; to **war and conflict**, which heighten geo-political competition and imperil access to food and energy – these have all served to bring into sharp relief the political, economic and technological vulnerability of Africa and the Caribbean.

Africa, with sixty percent of the world's arable lands, continues to import more than 60 percent of its food and agricultural inputs. An untenably high level of food insecurity is also the case with the Caribbean Community, where some members import more than 80 percent of the food they consume.

Africa, with 1.3 billion people, accounts for only 1.3 percent of global research spending, and a negligible 0.1 percent of all patents.

The Caribbean is dependent on skills development and innovation for competitiveness. Yet research and development expenditure in the region is a negligible fraction of the 2-3 percent of GDP being spent by major developed countries, and by China.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

On the wider human development and economic front, intersecting and reinforcing events in the guise of the global pandemic, climate emergency, and geo-political crises, are all having unprecedented impact in the developing world. These events have retarded growth and undermined indicators of social and economic well-being through transmission mechanisms that have included food and energy shocks, rising inflation, and increasing debt in both Africa and the Caribbean.

In September 2022 – the United Nations reported in its Human Development Index, that Africa has lost about five years of progress on human development. . While the proportion of its population living in poverty has decreased, the absolute number of the poor is still increasing.

Africa and the Caribbean, two bases of the reprehensible triangle in the Atlantic slave trade, are today the same two regions most at risk and most adversely affected by the fall.

Food insecurity has risen sharply in Sub-Saharan Africa, where more than one in five persons now face hunger.

Although there are obvious differences in the development trajectories of the two regions in the post-colonial era, there are also evident underlying structural and other commonalities bequeathed by history.

Among these commonalities are lack of economies of scale due to geographic size; a limited productive base; excessive dependence on external flows; reliance on a few export products and markets; transport and communications constraints; limited output diversification; and an inadequate domestic pool of trained and skilled human resources.

Overcoming these constraints remains an existential challenge. More than fifty years the post-independence era, the countries of Africa and the Caribbean are currently engaged in the endeavour to raise standards of living, build resilience to external shocks and overcome incessant vulnerability.

To navigate the transition to sustainable development **entails** the negation of the social, economic and environmental degradation and extraction we have suffered.

We seek sustainable development through equity in the development and use of human, natural, financial and physical resources. We desire inter-generational fairness, managing judiciously the relationship between the present and the future.

The colonial history of the Caribbean and Africa was in every sense the antithesis of this. Our common future must now be its affirmation.

The Caribbean has made significant progress in establishing, deepening, and entrenching democratic traditions and norms, and in advancing human development. But progress in raising the standard of living has been reduced in recent years by slow social and economic advancement as competitiveness, productivity and output have lagged.

Debt servicing has diverted resources from investment in social development. And resource inadequacy has constrained social investment in education, sanitation, healthcare, housing, skills training and development. There has been constant poaching of the skills and professional talents we have fostered.

The Caribbean region is prone to natural disasters and exposed to the deleterious impact of climate change on our major economic activities – tourism and agriculture, even though we produce much less than 1 percent of greenhouse gas emissions.

The Caribbean region has been faced also with a clutch of emerging issues over the years, rooted in the power dynamics of global rule and effective exclusion from the corridors of international decision-making.

These have included declining levels of development assistance, being barred from long-standing external markets; declining access to affordable and concessional finance from multilateral development and financial institutions; and, more recently, de-risking by large global banks.

Access to financial intermediaries is vital to substantial and constant economic growth and the strengthening of trade relations between Africa and the Caribbean as together we constitute only 4 per cent of entire global trade.

PROSPECTS

But we cannot succumb to defeatism. Today, amid global economic headwinds, several of the fastest growing economies in the world are to be found in Africa. And the Continent has seen quite robust economic growth of about 5 percent per annum over the past decade but critically still insufficient to raise standards of living broadly.

Estimates indicate that by 2040, Africa's 1.1 billion person workforce will be the largest and the youngest. We must make it also the most technologically skilled.

We cannot but welcome the evidence of renewed commitment to, and concerted action towards deepened African unity. This is reflected institutionally and politically in a higher profile African Union. The recent establishment of the Africa Continental Free Trade Area brings together 1.3 billion people, and combined African GDP of US\$3.4 trillion.

This Conference should also applaud Mali which, only one month ago, led the way for 14 African countries which were forced as a price for their independence, to repay France the cost of infrastructure during the period of colonisation and keep their foreign exchange accounts in Paris.

Ghana has stopped exporting raw cocoa and is selling finished chocolate now. Botswana is insisting that De Beers pay royalties for diamonds relative to market prices.

Let us work in unison to destroy the colonial shackles and create new synergies for economic and cultural links between Africa, the Caribbean and the Diaspora.

As Kwame Nkrumah reflected – “the forces that unite us are intrinsic and greater than the super imposed influences that keep us apart.”

In this era of globalization, the rate and pace of our economic growth and social development will be stultified, no matter how embedded and thriving is our democratic system, until there is a more just and equitable world order. In the political realm, we are seeing how crippled and ineffective the Security Council is in maintaining peace and order when one of its Permanent Members can use the veto to defy resolutions of the General Assembly.

The Nations of Africa must with the emerging countries of Asia and Latin America must immediately combine our collection

sovereign power to replace the existing archaic order and design a new and modern economic architecture fit for purpose to serve all mankind.

CONCLUSION

It is imperative that Africa, the Caribbean, and all peoples of African descent everywhere, at every level, renew their efforts and move constructively toward strengthening democracy and development. This is the mission of our generation: this is the 'sacred trust' from our forebears to achieve meaningful freedom and agency.

In this very profound sense, democracy must go beyond the formality and trappings of elections - important as these are - and encompass responsive institutions and inclusive processes which promote and protect rights and economic opportunities.

Development must be about more than quantitative improvements in measurable well-being: it must be about strengthening human capabilities to lead healthy, creative, and fulfilling lives; the right and freedom to pursue that which our citizens and societies have reason to value.

This, even above the horrific loss of life and treasure, was what was forcibly taken from our ancestors. And it is that restoration which will make the Continent and our Islands whole.

I am an optimist. In Africa, and in the Caribbean, there are shoots of spring.

We must continue to believe that these foreshadow the 'new dawn' that Senghor foresaw in his powerful 'Prayer to the Masks': itself a timeless tribute to resistance, to fortitude, and to the ultimate triumph of a resilient people "whose feet only gain courage when they beat the hard soil."

In Africa, in the Caribbean, in the wider Diaspora, today we must become that people!

When the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass fled Baltimore more than a century and a half ago, he famously declared "If there is no struggle, there can be no progress"

It is in the renewed pursuit of that eternal struggle we must engage all during our conversations at this Conference so that Global Africa unite as one to raise with one loud voice to secure at long last reparative justice and from that healing balm empower its people wherever they live, to rise above yonder horizons to realize one Aim, One Destiny, One Love.

Time come!!