

Deepening democracy in Africa

Opening speech given by Prof. David Abdulai at a high level International Symposium on “Deepening Democracy in Africa,” held at the Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST), Kumasi, Ghana on 25 April 2009.

Your Majesty Otumfuo Osei Tutu II

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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of his Majesty Otumfuo Osei Tutu II, I would like to welcome all of you to this HIGH LEVEL INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON “DEEPENING DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA.” His Majesty has invited some of the illustrious sons of Africa who are also former Heads of States and leaders in Africa for this event. They are the former President of Ghana, H. E. Jerry John Rawlings, former President of Nigeria, H. E. Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Botswana, H. E. Festus Mogae and former President of Sierra Leone, H. E. Ahmed Tejan Kabbah. His Majesty has also invited a “very good friend of Africa” as our keynote speaker, former Prime Minister of Spain, H. E. Jose Maria Aznar. Your Excellencies, **Akwaaba**, welcome to Kumasi, the Garden City of West Africa.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

A new “Wind of Change” is blowing across the landscape of Africa. This new wind is bringing about the democratic transformation of the continent from Cape to Cairo and from Dakar to Dar es Salaam. For example, in 1984, there were only four countries in Africa that held multiparty elections. Today, many countries on the continent have held multiparty elections. But do multiparty elections alone denote democracy? The answer is NO. This is because we have seen the use of multiparty elections in Africa by some leaders as a ritual to remain in power. Some of these multiparty elections have also degenerated into violence in some of our countries.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Thus, Africa’s democratic efforts are still at their nascent stages. Recent multiparty elections in Ghana which resulted in a run-off and were internationally regarded as peaceful, free and fair bode well for Africa. It evokes

the hope that a true democratic culture and tradition would one-day take hold in Africa. I am a firm believer that we shall get to that Promised Land. But to make sure that such a democratic culture takes hold in Africa, here are some few suggestions that African leaders, public and private sector officials, non-governmental organizations, chiefs, religious leaders and the civil society at large in my humble opinion should consider:

1. First, for a true democratic culture to be entrenched in Africa to bring about sustained growth and development, such a culture must be anchored on **Africa's rich traditional cultures and institutions.** This is because pre-colonial or traditional African societies had checks and balances on the power of rulers and consultative mechanisms for decision making. His Majesty Otumfuo Osei Tutu II's convening of this high level international symposium is therefore appropriate and points to his vision of how true a democratic culture can flourish in Africa if it is anchored on Africa's rich culture. For example, in traditional Africa, as outlined in one of my books called, *African Renaissance*, it is only through the will of the people that a chief can be acclaimed a chief. Numerous checks and processes were put in place to make sure that the chief's rule is based on the wishes of his people. The Council of Elders was the advisory body to the chief. They were also representatives of the different clans, lineages and groups in the kingdom. Chiefs who continue to disregard the advice or views of the Council of Elders run the risk of deposition. We are also aware of the concept of "Palaver" in traditional African societies where elders of a community gather under a tree and talk over pressing matters until they agree or come to a consensus. These few examples are some of the democratic traditions which are part of our African culture. But this is not an effort to glorify all aspects of the African culture. Those aspects of our culture that are not appropriate with our efforts at democracy must be changed. Hence, a true democratic culture will only be entrenched in Africa when it is anchored on Africa's rich traditions and cultures.
1. Secondly, to truly entrench a democratic culture in Africa to bring about growth and development, a culture of **accountability** is essential. Accountability affirms the obligation of leaders to those they lead. For that to pertain, the choosing of such leaders should be free and fair, there should be a vigorous and independent media, an independent judiciary which is free from the control of the Executive branch of government. There should also be an independent election commission, an independent ombudsman to mention a few. Thus at the heart of entrenching a true democratic culture in Africa, accountability is indispensable.
1. Third, the nature of democracy is such that the party which garners the majority votes wins the elections. This in some environments particularly in Africa is often unacceptable to the loser and can degenerate into violence. The case of the 2008 elections in Kenya comes to mind. To avert such incidences, there must be the **Rule of Law and an Independent Judiciary** in our respective countries to ensure that the spirit and letter of the law are enforced. I must add that, it is not just sufficient to have an independent judiciary, but the judiciary must be honest and be above reproach. Where a judiciary is corrupt and incompetent, the entrenchment of a true democratic culture becomes a mockery and indeed impossible.
1. Fourth, for a true democratic culture to be entrenched in Africa there must be a **credible opposition or credible opposition parties.** By a credible opposition, I mean any party that has a really strong chance, and offers a real challenge to the party in power of winning national elections. Opposition parties are really essential for democratic cultures to take root in Africa. This is because they serve as a true conduit for the peaceful channeling of popular discontent, a check on extra-constitutionality, and a force for stability in a true democracy. They also serve as the source of constructive, timely and disciplined criticism for the government of the day to deliver or perform sustainably. BUT I MUST ALSO UNDERSCORE THE IMPORTANCE OF OPPOSITION PARTIES IN AFRICA LEARNING TO AGREE TO

DISAGREE, AND AGREEING TO AGREE WITHOUT VIOLENCE.

1. Fifth, there must also pertain **civil and political liberties** in African countries to enable the entrenchment of a democratic culture. The availability of these liberties in Africa will enable citizens to be able to express themselves without the fear of any repercussions. This encourages popular participation which is essential for the people to choose candidates of their choice in a free and fair manner, without coercion or fear for their lives. In African countries where such liberties are lacking, citizens “vote with their feet” and turn-outs are rather low and true democracy loses its meaning and purpose.

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Ultimately, the entrenchment of a democratic culture in Africa is the responsibility of all Africans. Friends of Africa can help where they can **but the heavy lifting is our responsibility and ours alone**. Frantz Fanon says it best when he opined that, “*each generation in its relative nebulosity must discover its mission, and then fulfill or betray it.*” Our mission as Africans today is to “deepen our democratic efforts” for the growth and development of our continent. Will we fulfill it or betray it?

In closing, I would like to share with you a short lesson in democracy that my late surrogate father, K. O. Bonsu, who hails from the royal family in this kingdom and lived in this beautiful city until his death once, told me in Twi. He said:

“Oman Afrika be ye ye na efri yen ara. Democracy be ba yen oman se na efri yen tumi se.”Translated: If Africa is going to develop, it will depend on our efforts. If Democracy is going to come to our land, it will depend on us. Thank You Very Much.

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