

GLOBALISATION AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN AFRICA: A DIALOGUE

Speech given by Prof. David N. Abdulai at the 5th African Conference of Commandants.

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Mr. Chairman, Commandants of various staff colleges, Senior Officers, Distinguished guest, Ladies and Gentlemen. To our Arab brothers, *Assalmualaikum* and *Ahiwa wa salam*. All protocols respectively and duly observed.

The challenge of Africa is development. Without peace and stability, Africa's quest for development will be a pipe-dream. Let me tell you how impressed I am, to be in the presence of Commandants of staff colleges of Africa that produces excellent military leaders that make this peace and stability on the continent possible.

Thank you very much for inviting me to this auspicious event. It is indeed a great honour and pleasure to be here. I was asked to talk about "Globalisation and Human Rights in Africa." The challenge here is that globalization and human rights are totally different in meaning and in context. You cannot globalize without affecting humans rights. Therein lie the challenge. For example George Orwell, the English writer in his book *1984* talked about "Big Brother Watching," of how our privacy today is lost.

Mr. Chairman:

In our globalized world of today, numerous satellites are watching our every move. Daily, we leave our digital footprints behind in the electronic transactions we undertake thereby giving other people more information about us and our lives. Today sitting behind any computer

anywhere in the world, you can use Google Earth to pin-point with accuracy any location on earth. Then again who is listening in on your mobile phone conversations? Think about it, who is intercepting your text messages or e-mails?

Mr. Chairman:

This picture I have just painted is not fiction, but the fact of living in a globalized world today. This globalized world can be scary. But such intrusions into our private lives tantamount to, an invasion of our privacy, consequently, a violation of our human rights.

So what are human rights and how is globalization affecting human rights especially in Africa? Briefly, human rights are defined as those inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms that all human beings enjoy, regardless of their race, creed, colour, religion or sexual orientation. On December 10, 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although I will not quote or be able to elaborate on all 30 Articles of this document, highlighting a few of these articles to drive home the idea of human rights is necessary.

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of human rights states, **“all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. That are endowed with reason and conscience and we should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.”**

Article 2 states that, **“everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.”**

Article 3 states that, **“everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”**

Article 4 states, **“no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.”**

Article 5 states, **“no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment or punishment.”**

Mr. Chairman:

All I can say personally about human rights as a sum is that, they emanate from natural law, indeed what defines as human beings.

Let us now try to grasp an understanding of globalization. Globalisation according to Joseph Stiglitz, Nobel Laureate in Economics and author of *Globalization and Its Discontents*, “encompasses many things: the international flow of ideas and knowledge, the sharing of cultures, global civil society and the global environmental movement.” Others see globalization as the closer economic integration of the countries of the world through the increased flow of goods and services, capital and labour.

Generally, globalisation is regarded as the progress that brings our global village and its peoples together through travels, migration, war, trade, investment, cultural exchanges, information and communication technologies and through international organisations.

Mr. Chairman:

Since the inception of globalization as we know it, it has always been the hope that it will bring about a rise in living standards around the world, by allowing poor countries to have access to the markets of

developed countries, allow foreign investment to invest in poor countries to produce products cheaply for global consumption, and was also to allow open borders for free movement of goods and people.

It was also hoped that globalization will allow foreign aid with all its faults to bring benefits to millions of poor. Indeed, the globalization that has just been described has the potential to bring enormous benefits to human kind, particularly those who live in developing countries like Africa.

Mr. Chairman:

Unfortunately, globalization has failed to live up to its potential and the expectations we have of it. It has created a wide divide between the haves and the have-nots and has left a lot of people particularly those in the developing world in poverty. It has also threatened the economic stability of some countries, specifically in Asia and Latin America. Poor countries have been pushed to eliminate trade barriers but rich countries have kept theirs up through non-tariff barriers. They subsidize their farmers but urge developing countries not to do the same. Through the strengthening of Intellectual Property Rights, most Western drug companies are stopping drug companies in developing countries from manufacturing generic versions of life saving drugs and making them affordable to the poor in developing countries. Thousands therefore are condemned to death because individuals and their respective governments cannot afford to pay for these drugs. These are just some few examples of the negative consequences of globalization.

Mr. Chairman:

The problem is not with the ideal of what globalization stands for, but the way that it has been managed. You see, globalization, more than ever, is driven by economics not by politics or by social issues.

Hence, political and the social aspects of globalization have been thrown out of the window. The Impact on political and social rights of people in developing countries and that includes Africa cannot be emphasized enough. But who are the culprits who have hijacked globalization and are using it to satisfy their needs and agenda?

According to Joseph Stiglitz in his book, *Making Globalisation Work*, the culprits that have changed the rules of the game and have set new rules are the advanced industrial countries, particularly special interest groups within those countries. According to Stiglitz, these special interest groups have not sought to create a fair set of rules that would promote the well-being of those in the poorest countries of the world. He argues that the current process of globalization is generating unbalanced outcomes between and within countries. Furthermore, developing countries do not have a voice in shaping the process.

Mr. Chairman:

Here are some major concerns or discontents with globalization according to Stiglitz.

1. The rules of the game that govern globalization are unfair; they are designed specifically to benefit developing countries.
2. Globalisation advances material values over other values, such as the concern for the environment or for life itself.

3. The current way globalization is managed has resulted in it taking away much of the sovereignty of developing countries and this affects their ability to make decisions that enhance the well-being of their citizens; thus undermining democracy.
4. The economic system that has been “forced” upon developing countries is inappropriate and often grossly damaging.

Mr. Chairman:

What then is the impact of globalization on human rights? First, a forced globalization that is foisted down the throats of African countries and indeed developing countries manifested in the form of some of the dubious aspects of economic globalization have an impact on security rights. This can take the form of people being massacred, tortured, raped or murdered in the fight for natural resources. Numerous wars have been fought in our day as developed countries but even some of our African countries seek to secure their control of these natural resources.

Second, globalization can have an impact on our liberty rights. That is our rights to our beliefs, ability to express ourselves freely, freedom of association, assembly and movement. For example, economic globalization insists on free movement of goods, capital and services, but restricts the free movement of people. Developed countries come up with stringent and complicated visa procedures to visit their countries that majority of people in Africa and to a larger extent, developing countries do not qualify.

Third, globalization can have an impact on our political rights. That is our liberty to participate in politics, through peaceful assembly, protesting, voting and serving in public office. We all know this too

well in Africa today. In Africa, most of our people are engaged or consumed daily in their fight to win what I call, “the politics of the belly.” How can majority of Africans express their political rights when they cannot afford to feed themselves and live in abject poverty? How can you even talk about their political rights when they are denied their economic rights to live a decent life? How many of us here go out into the streets and shout for our political rights on empty stomachs?

Fourth, globalization can have an impact on our due process rights. That is the right to protect us against unwarranted jeopardy by the legal system. This includes imprisonment without trial, secret trails or exposure to excessive punishment. The imposition on developing countries and indeed Africa of a leadership not of their choice through the concept of “Regime Change” either covertly or overtly can impact on due process rights as dissenters and opposition to such puppet regimes can be visited with unfair trials and imprisonment. The Mobutu’s of Africa are a testimony to this fact.

Fifth, economic globalization can have an impact on the equal rights guaranteed to all citizens in a country by law. But when the gap between the haves and have-nots is a yawning one, we then have first and second class citizens with unequal rights. This can be linked to the impact of globalization on our economic and social rights; that is our protection against severe poverty and starvation. The *Soweto’s* of Africa, the *Diepsloots* of Africa, the *Kyelishas* of Africa, the *kiberas* of Africa are a case point.

Finally, globalization can have an impact on the rights of minority groups living in a country. This is the right that protects them against

discrimination, genocide and forced expulsion. We have seen the use of modern communication methods, afforded by globalization by some misguided leaders or majority groups in developing countries to abuse the rights of the minority. The example of Rwanda and the use of *Radio Television Libre des Mille Collines* which contribute immensely to the genocide is a case in point.

Mr. Chairman:

We know that globalization is here to stay and it would be fool-hardy to think that anyone can go back on globalization. The question for us in Africa then is: what should we do to make sure that globalization works for us? How can we manage globalization to enhance and human and economic rights?

First, we in Africa must unite, politically, economically and culturally. When we unite as a continent, we can face together all the adverse aspects of globalization. On African unity, the late Ghanaian president, Kwame Nkrumah once said, "I can see no security for African states unless African leaders like ourselves, have realized beyond all doubt that the salvation for Africa lies in unity . . . for in unity lies strength, and as I see it, African states must unite or sell themselves to imperialist and colonialist exploiters for a mess of pottage, or disintegrate individually."

Secondly, to make globalization work for Africa, we Africans must have effective governments. By effective governments I mean governments which uphold the rule of law, have strong and independent judiciaries, are open and transparent, accountable to their people, and are relentless in their combat of corruption. An effective government also encompasses an effective public sector

and a vibrant private sector. But it also means that as African countries, our governments should manage our meager resources well and we should also learn to live within our means.

Thirdly, we Africans must let our voices be heard about the adverse impact that globalization has on us at the numerous international fora we find ourselves. At these numerous fora, Americans speak for Americans, Europeans speak for Europeans, Asians speak for Asians. Who is going to speak for Africa but us Africans? Hence more than ever, we must work together with each other to put us in the right footing to be able to work with other developing countries to reform the international institutions that govern globalization to make sure that globalization works. We cannot afford to sit on the fence and expect globalization to work for us. We have to understand that we are responsible for our well-being 50 or so years after the independence of the first African country.

Fourthly, we Africans should not accept the economic dictum of the Washington Consensus about free markets. Markets are not free and we know it. Markets cannot be relied upon to deliver on public goods like defense for example. We also know that in some areas according to economist markets fail to exist. Also for a variety of reasons, markets are not self-regulating as evidenced by the boom and bust circles they contain. So it is important that African leaders and their governments play an important role in the economic stability of their various countries. They cannot leave that to the markets.

Finally, we Africans must get a grip on the degradation of our environment. We must realize that, the degradation of our

environment leads to poverty and poverty leads to environmental degradation. We must work together with the rest of the world on global environmental issues especially global warming as we suffer the brunt most from the fallout of global warming.

Mr. Chairman:

When all is said and done and all is done and said, only we alone as Africans know and can tell the impact of globalization on human rights on us. So when you leave here after your deliberations at this conference on this theme, I want you to take back with you to your numerous countries and to your policy makers; tell them that for us in Africa, human rights are about our development. Human rights are about how each individual African on our continent can maximize their God given potential to live a decent and respectful life. Is that too much to ask for? So enough this minute! Our people are tired of NATO — “No Action, Talk Only.” Lets get to work now that we understand the issues. This is because the threat to our liberty, according to Justice Louis Brandies, an American jurist, “lie not with the evil-minded ruler – for men born to freedom are quick to resist tyranny – rather it lies with men of zeal (like you and I), well-meaning, but lacking understanding.”

Thank You Very Much

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