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## Africa: The Challenge of Ethical Leadership

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# Africa: The Challenge of Ethical Leadership<sup>1</sup>

Dele

Two years ago I went to visit a prisoner in southern Rwanda to talk about his role in the genocide. He was brought to me in the prison courtyard, and in his pink uniform he looked vaguely like a comedian. It was a pleasant afternoon. Purple clouds drifted lazily overhead. The nearby hills were green and rolling, and the land was beautiful beyond any singing of it.

I asked the man, who was about to be released and sent home after nearly ten years, why he had participated, by his own admission, in killing his neighbours and friends. He said he did not think it was the right thing to do, that he initially even resisted doing so until he finally succumbed to the madness of the crowds. 'All our leaders were saying that it was our duty to stamp out the *inyenzi* — the cockroaches,' he said, a bit haltingly. 'Thinking back now, I can say that we all became mad at that time. Our leaders commanded us to do something terrible, and we did it.'

An individual must be held accountable for her own actions, and 'the devil made me do it' is by no means an acceptable excuse for participation in genocidal murder. Nonetheless, in thinking about the challenge of leadership in our age, I have often reflected on my encounter with the man in pink in the hills of Rwanda, and what his experience teaches us about the central role that leadership plays in fashioning a society — for good or ill.

We can usefully see the Rwandan genocide as the result of a catastrophic failure of moral leadership. In that country we saw a political elite systematically mobilize the population for the urgent task, not of nation building, but of mass murder. When the young thugs armed with machetes got a bit tired of their gruesome assignment, a mayor or a cabinet minister often got on air to urge greater effort. 'The graves are only half-full,' one leader announced grandly on the radio. 'Who will help us fill them?'

It was entirely coincidental that the Rwandan genocide began in April 1994, the same month that millions of South Africans queued for many miles to vote for the first time to end three centuries of racial injustice and elect Nelson Mandela as their president. Unlike the Rwandans, South Africa's leaders, under the inspired guidance of Mandela, worked tirelessly to steer their country away from what nearly everyone thought was its certain fate: a bloody conflagration along racial and ethnic lines. The tremendous moral authority of Nelson Mandela, acquired through a lifetime of service and sacrifice, came in especially handy in the aftermath, when black South Africans had to swallow hard and eschew triumphalism and the natural urge for vengeance, and instead take the path of reconciliation. As Archbishop Desmond Tutu said at the time, 'if we insist on an eye for an, everyone ends up blind.'

These two starkly different outcomes were both largely dependent on the quality of leadership cultivated by both societies. They help us understand the practical implications of the subject of our conversation these past few days: 'Leadership, ethics, and integrity in public life.'

## An Ethical Compass

I was born in a small university town in western Nigeria not that many years ago, into a large polygamous household, a vastly complicated organism that nevertheless seemed to us rather simple and well-ordered at the time, under the mostly wise and often lucky leadership of my father. Our moral universe was an

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extension of the wider community around us, in which people clearly understood and subscribed to a set of rules governing behaviour. In that world raising us children was a joint venture among the community's adults. Everyone lived under an overriding moral code encapsulated in the simple injunction that you shall not bring your family name into disrepute.

My duty in the household was to fetch the morning papers for my father. The vendor, who evidently had a full-time job elsewhere, always left the newspapers in neat stacks at the street corner. Without fail, day after day and year after year, buyers picked up the papers and left the money in a pile right there by the roadside. It was an honour system, not at all uncommon throughout Africa.

This is the good news. It is the one thing that proves to us that despite the appalling ineptitude and outright immorality that permeates leadership ranks throughout our continent, we are not culturally or genetically predisposed to more often than not produce the most wretched kind of leaders.

The urgent task of improving the quality of leadership in Africa — one that is ethically grounded, self-denying and thoroughly understands the concept of the common good — is evident from the extremely high cost of our current arrangement.

In order to overcome the ruinous cynicism of many Africans about the prospect for enlightened leadership ever emerging in their countries, we must be able to think of the impact of corruption differently.

The first thing to understand is that corruption kills — not metaphorically, not even indirectly. At the end of last year a planeload of school children crashed in southern Nigeria, killing all on board. It was one of several airliner crashes in that country last year, exposing the completely shambolic state of the regulatory agency for civil aviation, the corruption that circumvents normal inspections and the enforcement of rules. So although a government official claimed the crash was an act of God, the reality in Nigeria and much of the continent is that poorly maintained aircraft that would not otherwise pass the test of airworthiness are routinely allowed in the skies by bribe-taking officials.

Corruption literally makes citizens sick, when officials routinely expropriate for personal use the resources allocated to public health.

Corruption also is the principal cause of the mass impoverishment of African people, a grinding, agonizing poverty that shrivels ambition and leaves people susceptible to the sweet whispers of false prophets, who tell us that poverty is a friend of God. Religion has become a tool of the kleptocracy, which keeps the poor in their place by encouraging their sense of powerlessness, their superstition, their belief that their reward is in heaven, and that they will be rescued not by the sweat of their striving, but by divine intervention.

The new evangelism is churning out many more believers in Africa than anywhere else, encouraging the belief that a more just and more equal society would be a product of 'Immaculate Conception', rather than of hard work. God knows I am not an enemy of religion, just the prevailing kind that, to quote a favourite philosopher, seeks to 'spread an easy optimism, under the influence of which people spare themselves labour and trouble, reflection and forethought, pains and caution — all of which are hard things, and to admit the necessity for which would be to admit that the world is not all made smooth and easy, for us to pass through it surrounded by love, music, and flowers.'

The widespread indifference to ethics by much of Africa's political elite has helped reinforce the view that government, with rare exceptions, is primarily an obstacle to ordinary citizens. By and large the elite that took over from the colonial authorities has proved to be made up largely of those described by V.S. Naipaul as 'the mimic men', who see their roles primarily as exploiters in the same way that the colonial rulers did.

While government is essential to development, in many African countries it continues to be perceived, if not as outright illegitimate, at least as something best avoided by citizens whenever possible.

To begin to change the relationship between governor and governed for the better, a new kind of leader is required in Africa. Luckily, the right examples can be found scattered throughout the continent, where leaders are actually visibly and actively engaged in the hard work of building a good society, whether in Botswana or South Africa or, lately, Ghana and a handful of others.

We all know the essential characteristics of ethical leadership: selflessness, honesty, imagination, ambition, moral rectitude, sacrifice, humility, even wisdom. We know as well that, while this is our fondest wish, there can be no guarantees that we will get any such leader.

To best illustrate this point I often quote Karl Popper, the Viennese philosopher, and I will quote him here again without shame, for he most intelligently expresses my attitude to the necessity for constraints on political leadership. Popper says 'it is not at all easy to get a government on whose goodness and wisdom one can implicitly rely. If that is granted, then we must ask whether political thought should not face from the beginning the possibility of bad government; whether we should not prepare for the worst leaders, and hope for the best.'

In other words, we must face the reality that Africa continues to be hobbled by Big Man politics, the all-wise Father-Knows-Best who should stay in power indefinitely. The examples are all around us, in Zimbabwe, Uganda, and now, it appears, an attempt is being made to do the same in Nigeria.

The idea of term limits for political office holders is not necessarily the best option in all circumstances. After all, the United States is almost unique among the industrialized countries for imposing it on its presidency. But in the case of Africa, where state and civic institutions are weak and the president typically wields virtually untrammelled power, term limits are most assuredly an essential ingredient of good governance. The first decade of Robert Mugabe's rule was many times superior to his last 16. Yoweri Museveni, unwilling to relinquish power, is already taking his country downhill. President Olusegun Obasanjo, who has presided over the best government Nigeria has ever had — admittedly coming from a rather low base—is intimating that he would like the constitution changed so that he can remain in power. Like all good African leaders, he has even invoked celestial sanction as justification for why it might be best for Nigeria for him to remain in power. 'My God is not a God of abandoned projects,' he told an interviewer recently in Washington, when asked about whether he would stay beyond the mandatory two terms. In order words, no one else is capable or worthy of leadership. *Après moi, le deluge!*

Our experience in Africa shows this to be a rotten idea. We know from human experience also that leaders good, just and wise, are hard to find. As Popper says, 'it is reasonable to adopt, in politics, the principle of preparing for the worst, as well as we can, though we should, of course, at the same time try to obtain the best.' The question we must ask is, 'how can we so organize political institutions that bad and incompetent rulers can be prevented from doing too much damage?'

### **The International Community**

As we struggle with these questions, international institutions and powerful governments also can choose to be our allies, not collaborators with those rapacious leaders who seek to strip Africa bare. The dirty secret of the western world is that governments and banking institutions, in Europe and America, find it convenient to let Africa's ruling kleptocracy make off with the family silver, so long as it ends up in bank accounts in London, Washington, and Switzerland. Just a couple of years ago, during an unrelated investigation of Riggs National Bank in Washington, Congressional investigators found that Exxon Mobil secretly deposited more than \$700 million in the personal accounts of the president of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasago. These deposits, which could not be adequately explained as anything other than corruption, never led to any Exxon Mobil executives being tried for contravening U.S. law.

If anything good can be said to have come out of al-Qaida's terrorist onslaught, it is that western governments, pushed by Washington, are no longer so easily turning a blind eye to money laundering. A series of Nigerian governors have been arrested in London with suitcases full of U.S. dollars, and some effort is being made now to stanch the criminal flow of cash from poor countries to western banks. But

what would really help Africa is not so much financial aid, but a serious collaboration to stop the illegal extraction of the common wealth by thieving leaders.

Good things are happening throughout Africa. Fitfully and unevenly, many African countries have entered the reform era, and this promises to have a more lasting effect because, for the first time, it is not happening through the benevolence of outsiders but is being spearheaded by a new generation of Africans. Many Nigerian political leaders, in significant though not yet dominant numbers, are already succeeding in changing their country's direction. The same cries of *reformasi* that we heard in the streets of Jakarta and Surabaya in the late 1990s resounded in the streets of Nairobi and swept away an ossified oligarchy. Ghana is turning the corner, and an elected Senegalese government successfully organized elections that it then lost, peaceably, to the opposition.

To broaden the positive changes we are seeing, and to make them more lasting, Africans must set minimum standards for leadership — as well as maximum tenures.