

LETTER TO AFRICAN YOUTH

MEHARI TADDELE MARU



Dear African Youth,

When I saw the overwhelming youth participation during the worldwide and inclusive protests against the outrageous killing of George Floyd, I was moved to write this letter to share some of my views on the lessons that these events might offer young Africans.

Clearly, the killings and pervasive discrimination of black people in the world is a manifestation of the deep-rooted legacy of slavery and colonialism. It continues to extract from the Africa's political economy. Tonnes have been written on the topic of slavery and colonialism, and their devastating impact on Africa. This letter is inward looking, introspective, and focuses on what young Africans need to do to combat internal and external challenges Africa is currently facing.

When I looked at the widespread global protests, two features stood out for me: the youthfulness of the protesters and the number of Caucasians. While the youth, including white youth, can and did protest and tore down statues of their forefathers associated with slavery and colonialism, how many states in Africa allow their citizens to protest freely without fear of consequence?

Victor Hugo once said, 'you can resist an invading army, but you cannot resist an idea whose time has come'. An idea so widely and inclusively embraced by the youth is one whose time has come. At this moment in time, the world is witnessing the raw truth of this quote.

But what do the protests, some of them so far away, have to do with young Africans in particular?

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As I watched the video of George Floyd pleading 'I can't breathe' I could not stop thinking about how this resonated in the minds of so many among Africa's youth. In most of Africa, young people are choked by structural alienation from political decision-making. They face a systematic violation of fundamental human rights, the denial of access to quality education and vocations, and lack of decent jobs and an income.

Most African young people I meet pose two questions: how do we get out of this structural alienation that is stopping us from 'breathing' growth into our personal lives? What can we do for the development of our communities and the transformation of our countries and our continent? And sometimes there's a question focused more on my personal achievements: how did you get where you are now?

My answer to the last question has been: 'do not stop until you drop; take education seriously; cultivate the habit of regular reflection and introspection; work hard and build long-term relationships based on trust'. I also try to narrate my personal story, one of tragedy and survival: the tragic history of my family and its triumph against all adversities.

My personal story is not much different from that of many young Africans.

I was born in 1974 in the northern Tigray region of Ethiopia, which at the time was the centre of a protracted civil war. When I was about five years old I witnessed the devastating impact of this war on the livelihoods and wellbeing of Tigrayans. I also experienced at first-hand, catastrophic violations of human rights and the forced disappearance of close family members. My father, my maternal grandparents and my uncle were public servants in the imperial government of Ethiopia and were considered a noble family; they faced targeted attacks that threatened the survival of their kinship. They all were victims of forced 'disappearance' in the late 1970s, presumed to have been killed by the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), then a rebel group and now the ruling party of the Tigray regional state (and until recently part of the coalition government in Ethiopia).

My father was killed, as were my grandparents, and whatever property they had was confiscated – more aptly, looted – and thus I had no inheritance. Above all, the small town I grew up in was in a war zone for many years. As a child, I saw days of bloody battles; and most of my childhood nights were spent in a small underground bunker built in our house to protect us from stray bullets and shells.

Those were my own 'I can't breathe' moments.





Faced with such childhood conditions of personal insecurity and development threat, I had no choice but to concentrate on my education, in earnest and at any cost. My childhood experience, perhaps more than anything, has influenced my keen interest in the protection of human rights, elimination of displacement, and the promotion of human security measures in general.

I struggled until eventually I could formulate a personal philosophy of life, centred on commitment to the establishment of human rights-protective governance systems and the eradication of poverty, based on the maxim of Mahatma Gandhi: 'An eye for an eye makes us all blind'.

I have concluded that a survivor of such catastrophic events has two paths to choose from: the unprincipled, vicious life of a 'villain-victim' or the worthy life of 'hero-victim'. I chose the latter: to make use of my ominous childhood experience for the greater good and to contribute to a peaceful country and a more peaceful continent. I decided to do what I could to put an end to situations in which children are compelled to grow up parentless in an environment of conflict and violence.

My personal life has been formed around this tragic family history.

Despite my family loss, I refused to be a prisoner of the past and I refused to become accusatory and embittered. I avoided a life of self-pity. The experience has fuelled my determination to try to help bring about a political governance protective of human rights in Ethiopia and in Africa as a whole. This commitment was amply reinforced during my early years at Addis Ababa University as Student Union President, and subsequently at the universities of Harvard, Oxford and Giessen.

I know that not every African child has the opportunity to get an education, and had it not been for my mother's unreserved commitment to her children, neither would I: education would have remained a distant dream and I would have been just another statistic in the databank of African illiteracy.

But triumph against the odds begins at a personal level, with taking responsibility seriously. The seeds of triumph are sown in clarity of vision, determination to realise the vision through iron personal discipline, solid ethics, and the judicious use of time for the transformation of the conditions of young Africans. The most precious asset of youth is time, and youthful boldness. Time is on the side of youth, and boldness permits to dare, to try, and fail, and try again, and when necessary, storm the sky.





Dear young Africans, ours is the youngest of all the continents: the average age is 18 and more than 70% are below 35. But these 70% for the most part are excluded from decisions concerning their nation's fate. How then can such an overwhelming numerical majority, one that is the most connected, conversant and mobile segment of African society, be deprived of its rightful share in decision-making powers and associated opportunities?

Simply put, African youth 'can't breathe' due to the longstanding structures of alienation imposed on them. Poverty is the cause of many of the ills African youth is burdened with, yet that poverty could have been made history; but the predatory nature of the African state, and a deeply-entrenched political leadership ensures that just the few have it all, and many have nothing. The outcome is that youngsters in many African countries are living on a knife-edge.

Unemployment is not just about easier day-to-day living. Jobs and an income are doors to a better life and a positive future of empowerment and freedom. Jobs empower young people and activate their energies so as to develop their talents and abilities to the fullest and a decent income gives them the space to pursue education and vocations. It is true, though, that the gap between the aspirational living standards, and the reality of their conditions is sometimes too wide to bridge, which leads to the urge to emigrate to where more opportunities lie – however great the physical danger along the routes to that better future.

Yes, young Africans, especially our sisters, shoulder multitudes of burdens, and shoulder them alone. But if there is one pressing agenda for solidarity among them, with far-reaching consequences for each young person and for every family, nation and indeed the entirety of Africa, it is to build solidarity for gender equality and justice. The exploitation of women and girls has left a scar too deep to heal. Without equality of gender, the new freedom generation of African youth cannot achieve the Africa it wants.

The new Pan Africanists have their mission squarely cut out for them.

Rightly colonialism has to be blamed for many of Africa's ills, but we should also blame ourselves for the current state of Africa. Lamentation over colonialism will not address the critical challenges of Africa while confronting internal challenges head-on may give rise to freedom generation that takes the destiny of Africa upon itself.





Africa's political parties and its entire political landscape are still dominated by 'old guard' relics of the 1970s and 1980s, which hold on to power by fomenting conflict and employing corrupt practices. These old political frameworks, dominating political and economic discourse as they do, refuse to embrace new ideas and deny young politicians a seat at the tables of power. But for Africa to be at peace with itself, it must first be at peace with the most important, connected and dynamic portion of its population – its young. Young people need to understand Africa is theirs and bring themselves to the forefront; and for this to happen they need to take over existing political parties, form new ones, and dominate the African political narrative.

The realities on the ground, of extreme poverty, high youth unemployment, irregular migration and displacement, deplorable gender injustice and politics of exclusion, may seem daunting but they are not reasons to stop. Pleading for government help – such as family care – or engaging in anti-social activities, do not solve the problem. In the long term, the solution lies in personal growth, the transformation of society and the overhaul of the structure of the African state.

The choices for young Africans are stark: to be either defeatist, rejectionist, and isolationist; or forward-looking, optimistic, assertive and pan-Africanist. They should choose the latter and work to forge a bright collective future. If my early life teaches anything, it is the need to reject a defeatist siege mentality and any other isolationist tendencies, and above all to avoid resigning oneself to fate and withdrawing from public affairs. The difficult realities should serve to rally the youth and direct all its time and energies towards organised politics, and to mobilise their communities to vote for leaders with integrity and systems of accountability.

Young Africans must put an end to apathy in politics.

They should not fear politics, nor should they accept the politics of fear; and they need to break the silence, stop continually looking over their shoulders and liberate themselves. They should dare, and demand reform and openness. They need to hold fast to the culture of inquisitiveness, tolerance, accountability and community service with integrity and high ethical standards. What is required is the politics not of fear but of tolerance, rational discourse and reconciliation.

Politics is fundamentally local, and votes are individual.





Young Africans should mobilise to win votes and have them cast for the candidates offering genuine pledges and real effort. Only the organisation of politics around the young can change the situation by voting for politicians who truly intend to deliver on oft-repeated promises of job creation. It is far better to elect leaders who promise less and tirelessly work to deliver, than the reverse. Young Africans need to fight lip-service and autocracy politics and instead foster public allegiance to politicians who pursue delivery and democracy. Only organised youth politics can bring cultural transformation for the young people – especially girls and women – in our society; and only if the youth mobilises communities and voters can it punish those self-serving leaders by removing them through the ballot box.

The young people of Africa need to dare and storm the sky; if not now, then when?

Dear African youth, Africa's hopes are hanging on you and everyone is watching.

Undeniably, the present Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the deplorable circumstances of African youth. The jobs of many young people have evaporated. But the impact is not limited to a locality or a country; it is as global as it is continental. The response to it needs to be pan-African and we know that Africa is now in dire need of new pan-African leadership. We cannot rely on the work of the early pan-Africanists for today's challenges such as Covid-19. African youth needs to take up the mantle of pan-African leaders of thought such as W E B Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Alice Kinloch, Amy Garvy, Kwame Nkrumah, Emperor Haile Selassie, Thomas Sankara, Thomas Mboya, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, Patrice Lumumba, Ahmed Sekou Toure, Ahmed Ben Bella, and Nelson Mandela.

The current generation of young Africans is a freedom generation, and it needs to bring about a complete and permanent paradigm shift and embrace the organisation of politics towards unity in a single purpose behind an idea whose time has come. It is the African Agenda for Youth, and it is impossible to resist.

The liberation of young Africans can be achieved only through the political organisation of all communities, starting from the home then out to the nearby community, then from the national platform to the continental. Pan-African youth needs to strive day and night for intellectual sovereignty, policy sovereignty and the true sovereignty of African nations. The roots of a new pan-African leadership can only grow from the thoughts of a past pan-African consciousness.





But perhaps movements such as Black Lives Matter offer more relevant methods and even message of 'Young Lives Matter' to today's young Africans. They need to read African history, think, innovate, write, connect, deliberate and act through pan-African organisations. For this purpose, they must work to separate the wheat of international actors from the chaff: to foster alliances with the good actors, engage the bad, and combat the ugly.

Dear African youth, for me, the going was very tough but I stayed on course, non-stop, and I will carry on, and I will not stop until I drop!

Whatever your specific circumstances, you should not stop either.

Not until you drop!

