COVID-19: TIME FOR AFRICA TO ROOT OUT THE ‘OLD PANDEMIC’.

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IN SUMMARY

- It is not acceptable that in the 21st century, Africa’s fight against COVID-19 is heavily dependent on gifts, donations and loans from the international community.

- An inward-looking but externally ferocious form of globalisation is emerging. An outward-looking Africa in an in-ward looking global context will be more devastating to the African people than the COVID-19 pandemic itself.

- Africans in Africa and the diaspora need to unite and work towards the common good of the continent. There has to be a perpetual wind of pan-African consciousness.

- Posterity will judge African leaders and Wananchi harshly if they fail to discern and use the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to unapologetically and irrevocably sculpt a new African order.
‘If Africa’s multiple resources were used in her own development, they would place her among the modernised continents of the world. But her resources have been and still are being used for the greater development of overseas interests’ Kwame Nkrumah.

Of all the pandemics which have bludgeoned Africa, the ‘old pandemic’ whose agenda has been and will always be to appropriate and exploit its resources is the oldest and the most resilient, stubborn, ferocious and unforgiving one. This ‘old pandemic’ is the exploitation of Africa’s resources by external actors. It is a ‘pandemic’ which cannot be contained or annihilated through enforced lockdowns, the wearing of surgical face masks, sanitisation, or physical distancing. While it is important for Africa to put a tenacious fight against COVID-19, it is more important for it to take steps to root out the ‘old pandemic’. Africa may win the battle against COVID-19, but this would be a Pyrrhic victory if the ‘old pandemic’ continues to engulf the continent. In fact, Africa must realise that the ‘old pandemic’ is making capital of the COVID-19 pandemic by strategically positioning its interests in the continent, particularly through gifts, donations and loans. A tour into the history of the colonisation of Africa shows that coercive and persuasive measures such as gifts were used to facilitate colonisation. For example, the Rudd Concession shows how these strategies were used as a path to the colonisation of Africa. When Africa finally emerge from the woods of COVID-19, it may find itself deep in the jaws and claws of the ‘old pandemic’. Some scholars argue that COVID-19 is characterised by the ‘new scramble for Africa’. Africa needs to take a number of steps to root out the ‘old pandemic’, but this op-ed focusses on four key ones: changing the approach to politics, particularly electoral; promoting regional cooperation and integration; addressing historical inequalities and creating the space for democratic state-society conversations and contestations.

COVID-19 has exposed the depth and breadth of Africa’s vulnerability and wretchedness. This is despite that the continent is adorned with abundant natural resources. In Neocolonialism: the Last Stage of Imperialism (1975), Kwame Nkrumah argues that the exploitation of Africa’s resources by the world’s powerful states is one of the major factors which have impoverished it. It is not acceptable that in the 21st century, Africa’s fight against COVID-19 is heavily dependent on gifts, donations and loans from the international
COVID-19 responses in countries such as Zimbabwe have demonstrated that many African countries are largely unable to look inward for solutions to their problems. This explains why African governments are stampeding to send distress calls to the international community. Sights and stories of African leaders extracting pride from receiving gifts and donations from the international community are very worrisome. These gifts and donations are coming to a continent whose resources have been brutally exploited, but it is expected to be grateful, not by word of mouth, but by exposing itself to more exploitation.

It is particularly important for Africa to annihilate the ‘old pandemic’ because the state of the world is transitioning seismically as a result of COVID-19. A number of changes and challenges are emerging internally and externally. Externally, the way the world is responding to the pandemic patently shows that globalisation is transmuting. Instead of taking a collaborative approach, states are largely seeking to assert influence individually. This shows that they are becoming more inward-oriented. States are likely to enact and entrench policies and practices which prioritise their citizens. The racist bouts which took place in China suggest that racism against Africans is likely to exacerbate. It is likely that Africans will be regarded as carriers of pandemics. Regular pathways of migration are likely to be narrowed and closed, making it difficult for Africans to study and work abroad. An inward-looking but externally ferocious form of globalisation is emerging. An outward-looking Africa in an in-ward looking global context will be more devastating to the African people than the COVID-19 pandemic itself. Africa needs to build the capacity to look inward for solutions to its problems.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents Africa with the window to extricate itself from the ‘old pandemic’. However, this is not an easy endeavor because enormous odds stand on its way. At least four steps need to be taken. First, Africa needs to take an African-inspired and centered approach to politics, particularly electoral. Essentially, there is need to move away from winner-take-all politics: where the winner gets virtually everything and the losers walk away with nothing. This has reduced politics to a zero-sum game. On the one hand, the disgruntled opposition does everything possible to undermine the performance of the government. It derives satisfaction from the failures of the ruling party, seeing this as irrefutable evidence of its lack
of legitimacy. On the other hand, the ruling party ‘throws away’ the script of
democratic politics, doing everything possible to repress or annihilate the
opposition. The period towards elections is characterised by contestations
over the need to level the electoral field. The period in-between elections is
characterised by contestations over the legitimacy of the political authority.
As a result, African countries tend to always be fixated on past and coming
elections. It becomes a question of the next election, not the next
generation. Political office should be seen as an opportunity to prepare
imperishable future for present and succeeding generations. The ‘old
pandemic’ takes advantage of the polarisation which is produced by the
‘winner-takes-all’ system.

Second, all historical ‘sins’ have to be cured, particularly in respect of the
distribution of resources. At independence, between the belligerent demands
of capital and poor and marginalised black Africans, most governments chose
to protect the privileges of capital in order to safeguard political and
economic stability. The governments protected and entrenched a highly
unequal distribution of the economy. This penchant for protecting and
promoting capital to the detriment of the needs and wellbeing of the people
continues to obtain in African states. The COVID-19 pandemic offers African
leaders the opportunity to move to the right side of history by seeking to
protect the needs, aspirations and happiness of the African people.

Third, Africa should accelerate long overdue regional integration. Infrastructure which connects the continent should be constructed,
particularly roads and railway lines. Intra-Africa trade and cooperation must
be enhanced. It must be easy for African people and goods to move from
one country to the other. Africa needs to understand that it faces a common
existential threat which needs to be fought, not as individual and isolated
states, but as a united front. In the area of international trade deals, African
countries are being isolated and asphyxiated. They should therefore largely
negotiate trade deals as a united front and not as individual states or small
groups. Africans in Africa and the diaspora should unite and work towards
the common good of the continent. There has to be a perpetual wind of pan-
African consciousness.
Fourth, conversations and contestations between African states and societies over the quality of citizenship and the various shades of inclusion and exclusion that framed peoples’ relationship with their states should be democratically conducted. This should be an internal process, far from the ever-watching eyes and ever-interfering hands of capital. The space for demand, contestation, and meaningful pursuit of conflict over prevailing inequalities has to be created and protected. These conversations and contestations are a legitimate exercise of agency by African societies which have been excluded from political and economic processes for so long. The eloquent voices from the society have been brutally repressed since the dawn of independence, causing humanitarian tragedies.Externally, the contestations were submerged in the conceptualization of Africa as a continent of strife, poverty, and bad governance. As a result, the import and legitimacy of these contestations were ‘lost’.

The African people should be allowed to challenge the basis upon which they are governed. They need to trust the state and to have a voice in the economic and political direction of their countries. African leaders must cross the line and be on the side of the *Wananchi*. So far, they have largely acted as conduits through which African resources are exploited. Africa is endowed with abundant resources. But these resources are not an infinite natural endowment. The sooner they are used for Africa’s development the better. Posterity will judge African leaders and *Wananchi* harshly if they fail to discern and use the lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic to unapologetically and irrevocably sculpt a new African order. It is time for Africa to cross the Rubicon and claim its pride of place among the mutating community of civilisations.

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