



## **Africa remains in chains**

*Sunday Independent opinion article (21 May 2017)*

The second largest continent in the world, Africa has also become the world's second most populous continent. As the late Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai put it, "Africa is one the richest continents on the planet and yet most African countries remain poor." Besides significant deposits of precious minerals and metals, the continent boasts of a very youthful population, increasing high level of internet connectivity, emergence of new innovation hubs and, until recently, home to many of the fastest growing economies in the world.

However, the above high points have been blighted by several socio-economic and political challenges. Although the politics of the Cold War contributed in no small measure to the instability that bedevilled the continent from the 1960s to the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, the colonial policy of divide and rule – or define and rule as Mahmood Mamdani would put it – the arbitrary demarcation of borders, the reification of tribes as a marker of identity and the struggle for control over scarce economic opportunities have combined to weaken state capacity. Needless to say, the very notion of a post-colonial state is problematic.

In over five centuries of encounters with other parts of the world, Africa's experience has been marked by exploitation, oppression, subjugation and alteration of the distinct identities of the peoples through a long process of psychological distortions. Both Arab and European slave trade, which lasted for centuries, effectively truncated the process of population growth, distorted economic development and militarised the whole continent through the promotion of inter-tribal wars as Walter Rodney described. The imposition of imperial domination and colonial intrusion also disrupted the process of economic development. As Claude Ake explained, the introduction of wage labour and the constraints to pay taxes resulted in the loss of opportunity to pass through agrarian revolution which could have been a precursor for industrial revolution in Africa.

The organisation of the global economy since the end of the Second World War has cemented the peripheralisation of African countries through the institutionalisation of unequal international division of labour, in which the

rules of the game are set by the West and its allies, which undermines the capacity of African states to adopt indigenous approaches to socio-economic development.

Despite the recent optimism and euphoria about 'Africa rising', lack of fundamental transformation in the structures of the economies in Africa has resulted in the fast-growing economies of early 2000s returning to the throes of debts, poverty and inequality. For many decades, the parlous and low state of economic growth has hampered technological development and limited the capacity of African countries to build military hardware etc – African economies are effectively performing below their potential. In a world that has continued to be defined by principle of realism, state-centric power and influence, the lack of economic and military power has kept African countries at the margin of global influence. A classic example of this being that no African country is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council today. Neither is any of the main global economic institutions headed by an African.

While the West remains stubbornly stuck in their supremacist position of privileges through which they maintain the status quo by rights, African leaders have been complicit in the marginalisation of the continent. Lack of understanding of the question of identity and common positionality in the global hierarchy of power have continued to make Africans work at cross purposes against one another at multilateral levels. Rather than speak with one voice and negotiate as a block, African leaders either prefer allegiance with their former colonial masters or resort to their facile national patriotic base when issues of international diplomacy and negotiations are involved.

The few instances where African leaders have taken bold initiatives to advance the interests of the continent, especially under the presidencies of Thabo Mbeki and Olusegun Obasanjo as well as a few others before them, have either suffered discontinuity or outright suppression. The leadership deficit, especially in relation to thought leadership, is widening. These leaders had tried to take the baton from earlier African nationalists who ensured the political independence of the continent. Nowadays the continent is losing momentum and it is probably worse off than it was ten years ago.

It is encouraging though that there is new momentum of engagement with Africa, especially from non-traditional partners (in Asia and Latin America). Even though this engagement is also motivated by the desire for raw materials and markets, it presents a new opportunity for Africa to redefine its mode of engagement with the rest of the world. This will require crafting a new strategy that is underpinned by the principle of pan-Africanism and Africa's renaissance. It would be important that Africa confronts the issue of a socio-economic model

that can work better for the continent. Understanding the history of the continent and why the continent remains in chains would greatly help.

It is in this context that we look forward to Professor Mahmood Mamdani's lecture in this year's Thabo Mbeki Africa Day Lecture that was inaugurated by former President Mbeki himself in 2010. Mamdani will lecture on 'Africa and the changing world' on 26 May 2017 at the University of South Africa. As has become tradition, a debate on his Lecture would take place after his Lecture. The Lecture is preceded by the seventh African Unity for Renaissance Conference and celebrations surrounding the Africa Day itself.