

**1993 E.H. Johnson Award  
The Most Reverend Desmond Mpilo Tutu**

**(speech given by Rev. Jose Belo Chipenda,  
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**Opportunity for Change**

Seven years from now we will say good-bye to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It will be the dawn of a new millennium. The past will be remembered as a shadow, but in the longer term, the course of history is likely to be different.

The last 36 years witnessed two major revolutions in Africa. The first brought political independence; the second is said to be bringing democracy. The first one began in 1957 when Ghana became the first independent nation in black Africa; the second is embedded in the ongoing wind of democratic change signalled by the release of Nelson Mandela and the liberation of Namibia.

From 1957 to 1990, fear and uncertainty, springing from the cold war and neocolonialism, reigned supreme. Inexperienced young African countries and, to some extent, all young nations in the third world were conditioned to only two options; either to capitalism or to socialism. Teachers, economists, engineers, and all kind of advisers were available. Ignoring people's culture, expatriates "used the colonial yardstick to judge us and to provide advice more in the interest of the colonial power than in our own interest".

There are 52 countries in Africa with more than 600 million people. Excluding South Africa, nine nations have fewer than 1 million people, twenty-seven have fewer than 10 million people, fourteen have between 10 and 50 million people, and only two, Egypt and Nigeria, have more than 50 million people each.

From 1985 to 1989 food production decreased in 31 countries. Militarism took the largest portion of national budgets and foreign debt increased to alarming proportions. It is a well-known fact that the African continent is rich in natural resources, but her people are poor. Africa, south of the Sahara, with a population of 530 million people, has a Gross National Product of less than US\$150 billion, roughly the same as Belgium, a small country in Europe with a population of 10 million people. The prospects for the future, in the eyes of many economists, is bleak.

Today Africa is a continent where conflicts are promoted against the will of poor peasants, by those who want to control its destiny; 12% of the world's population, belonging to more than 2,250 ethnic groups, have the potential of developing conflicts; natural and man-made disasters produce refugees and internally displaced persons in exaggerated proportions; military and civilian dictators rule with impunity; 2.5 million people are believed to be HIV positive, carrying the AIDS virus; 29 out of the 43 least developed countries in the world are African; life expectancy at birth is only 51 years, compared to 62 in all developing countries and 74 in industrialized countries; only 37% of Africans have access to health services compared to 63% in all developing countries and 100% in industrialized countries; land degradation is forcing 50,000 to 70,000 square kilometers of land out of production annually; hope fights against hope.

**Time for Change**

Even against all these odds there is hope for Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The future of Africa is dictated neither by statistics published by scholars nor by the war being fought in Liberia nor by the chaotic situation in Somalia. As a matter of fact, “people everywhere are not just problems to be resolved but also mysteries to be explored, not vacuums to be filled but riches to be discovered”, as Robert Vachon rightly wrote in *No Life Without Roots* (p. 73).

The opportunity for change has come. The unfolding wind of change places people in the middle of every major event. The fundamental difference between the first and the second revolution is essentially one of perspective. That difference must be considered from the people’s point of view.

During the first 30 years of independence, African leaders thought of independence as the way to success. This was illustrated by Kwame Nkrumah who said: “Seek ye first the political kingdom, and every other thing shall be added unto you.” Today, 36 years later, it is understood that political independence is void without economic independence. The best illustration is provided by the external debt which has increased from US\$48.3 billion in 1978 to US\$230 billion in 1988 and US\$250 billion in 1989.

There are people who believe that the youth of Africa have learned from the mistakes of their parents. Though respect is still in evidence, these senior Africans are viewed as people who were conditioned by their circumstances to react to situations of their day. Many of the public utterances of people like Habib Bourguiba, Sekou Toure, Nnandi Azikiwe, Mamadou Dia and others, were in opposition to various forms of oppression. Africa has been politically, culturally and economically oppressed. Political oppression created nationalism; cultural oppression elicited the concept of negritude; economic oppression gave rise to the Anti-Apartheid movement. The Organization of African Unity, which came into being in May 1963, exploited the Anti-Apartheid movement as a means of uniting all African countries against the common enemy, South Africa.

1990 will go down in history as the beginning of a new revolution. It started in Benin. After sweeping the whole continent, the wind of democracy is now in Malawi. Democracy is changing the perception of the new generation of Africans. They are moving from a reactive to a proactive posture. This is a welcome phenomenon; for instead of blaming outsiders for existing ills, the mood and the call now, is for action. A deep sense of responsibility is developing among young people followed by a conscientious will to be accountable.

The first proactive African still alive is Julius Nyerere, who in 1967 issued the “Arusha Declaration”. A few years later, Milton Oboto of Uganda circulated his socio-political manifesto known as the “Charter of the Common Man”. Both the Arusha Declaration and the Charter of the Common Man, though good, failed because they did not elicit popular support. They were made public at a time when the West was afraid of everything that had the scent of socialism.

In 1990 the O.A.U. launched the African Charter of Popular Participation in Addis Ababa which called

1. upon Governments:
  - to create the political space to hear the dissident
  - to be more accountable to the people
  - to support people-centered development projects
  - to end armed conflicts, reduce defence spending, and
  - to redirect resources to productive and social services
2. upon the People:
  - to seize the initiative and press for participation

- to create consultative machinery at various levels
- to practice popular participation within families
- to develop links across national borders

3. upon the International Community:

- to foster decentralization of development processes
- to support African initiatives in development programs
- to reduce debt and debt-servicing obligations

Today, with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disappearance of the world's ideological divide, the opportunity for change has come. Living at a time when Africa is marginalized and of no interest to the West, Africans are free to propose concrete, valid options for the future. The effects of democracy were already seen in 1990, 1991 and 1992 in countries like Algeria, Angola, Botswana, Burkino Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Djibouti, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gabon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Namibia, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Most dramatic was the period between September 10, 1990 to October 31, 1991, during which period ten heads of state in Africa were either voted out, toppled, exiled, or murdered.

During the same period, Francophone countries held their national conferences presided over by the clergy, while heads of state, until then revered, were suddenly confronted with peoples' power. President Mobutu of Zaire, Eyadema of Togo, Denis Sassou Nguesso of Congo, and Habyarimana of Rwanda were publicly humiliated and their private lives exposed. The Anglophone countries changed their constitutions and embarked on the long road toward elections. The Lusophone countries, mainly Angola and Mozambique, dropped their adherence to Marxism and legalized opposition political parties.

### **Complex Forms of Democracy**

The situation is not rosy. Democracy, as it is viewed in Africa today, has emerged in differing shades, based on differing expectations. Democracy is not merely the right to vote and seize power. It is about a whole complex of rights and duties which citizens must exercise if a government is to be open, accountable and participatory. In the case of Africa, the achievement of democracy will prove to be a long process.

If the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to bring solutions to the many problems inherited by Africans, the concept of democracy must first of all be revisited. Some think that democracy is a natural result of the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe; others say it is a tool for the creation of a 'new world order'. There are people who wrongly identify democracy with political multi-partyism or with free market economics. There are also those who believe that a point has been reached where the traditional emphasis on production politics is giving way to a new age of consumption politics.

Secondly, there are questions that must be addressed. Mr. Oketch Owiti, a lecturer at the University of Nairobi, has asked: "What exactly is democracy? Can democracy exist where poverty, economic and social injustice, political inequality, power abuse, etc., exist? Can democracy exist where the ideas of right and wrong are confused?" We could lengthen the list of questions: Can democracy exist where people are poor, where they cannot fix the price of their agricultural products and where they are unable to provide health services for the people and education for the people and education for their children? Can democracy exist in a world where the gap separating the rich and the poor is constantly widening?

Thirdly, cultural consideration should be highlighted. This world of ours seen from the top is like a global village. But for those who live in small huts, life can only be maintained if democracy takes into account their cultural values. What we see today in Europe, Asia, and Africa, where ethnically identified groups are courageously demanding recognition of their existence and the right to have a say in whatever is planned, including the control of their own destiny highlights the need to create space for new cultural expressions. It has been observed and rightly so that people stripped of their identity are not capable to self-determination and when this happens, the society begins to disintegrate because it can no longer generate the energy required to sustain itself.

This may explain the present African situation. Every time Africans have a question, they go North to find an answer; every time they are confronted with problems they borrow flawed solutions from the North. It is generally acknowledged that in our propensity to find easy ways of getting out of complicated situations, from the North “we borrowed the profit motive but not the entrepreneurial spirit. We borrowed the acquisitive appetites of capitalism but not creative risk-taking. We are at home with western gadgets but are bewildered by western workshops. We wear the wristwatch but refuse to watch it for the culture of punctuality. We have learned to parade in display but not drill in discipline. The West’s consumption patterns have arrived, but not necessarily the West’s technique of production” (p. 5, Culture Forces in the World).

Fourthly, democracy, as it is presented by politicians, is alien to Africa. It is expensive, loaded with a militaristic arrogance and destructive content. It places people into artificial antagonistic boxes, turns friends into enemies, and aims at arousing unnecessary competition. Anyone who is familiar with western politics, recognizes that what is good for Americans and Europeans is not necessarily good for Africans. As a matter of fact, competition may be necessary in some areas of human endeavour, but society, everywhere, is in need of more love, compassion, and cooperation to enjoy life in its fullness.

While western democracy, sustained by a thick layer of economic power, is based on win/lose or lose/win affair, African democracy ought to be different. Recognizing that sharing poverty is traditionally considered a virtue, there can only be two choices: win/win or lose/lose. Experience gathered during these last three years has proved that any attempt to deviate from either is to invite trouble.

The military and ethnic problems faced by African countries such as Angola and Zaire, Rwanda and Togo, Somalia and Sudan, Kenya and Algeria, find their origin in the understanding or misunderstanding of what democracy is all about. Civil wars and ethnic clashes witnessed in so many countries, give “ample evidence to show that ever so many (foreign) attempts to cure evils have brought new, and at times worse, evils into the world” (p. 101, Religion in the Struggle for World Community). But we should not despair. Increasing crises should not deter us from moving ahead. They should instead be considered as a source of enrichment because they encourage the search for new solutions.

We would like to end this brief presentation by saying: In reviewing what has happened in these last thirty years we should not forget that the century about to begin will be highly challenging. We have to be proactive in order to survive. In this context we only have two alternatives: either to perish by responding to western initiatives on democracy or to survive by launching our initiatives compatible with African values and understandings.