

Africa needs leaders, not elites copying the West

Analysis

ASHANTI KUNENE

AFRICA, for all her diversity, heritage and history has suffered under both colonial and homegrown masters and monsters. From the aspirational heydays of Kwame Nkrumah and Thomas Sankara, to the tragedies of Idi Amin, the compromises of Nelson Mandela and Thabo Mbeki, African leadership has taken many different forms over the decades.

What we can all agree on, however, is that there is a severe leadership crisis in Africa, one that has existed since colonialism and its malicious legacy. It's a leadership crisis that we must all take responsibility for.

It is easy for us to say that "Africa's dictators and malevolent leaders are the main contributors to our underdeveloped status (that) they are the chief culprits stoking fires of civil strife, political instability, poverty, hunger and a plethora of social ills on the continent through their uncaring, myopic and selfish type of leadership".

Easy and legitimate yes, but an analytically narrow perspective. We must analyse the crisis of African leadership in a holistic manner, in its global context.

In this white supremacist, patriarchal and capitalist global system – this broken international system – African leadership is indeed mediocre, it's a leadership that lacks intellectual depth and political will that is both required and expected. What's more, we've all been complicit in it.

This results from the fundamental mediocrity of the global white supremacist system, that the West can only stand tall if the rest of us are on our knees.

That in the very act of colonisation, decolonisation was anticipated; that the West planned to perpetually dominate Africa in every form imaginable, spelling out how, despite independence, "Africa should not be in a position to rule without taking its cue from us".

The characteristics of African leadership were then moulded by colonial empires.

We can't even begin to imagine African leadership that isn't marked by corruption; where the Macrons of the world, for all their intellectual accomplishments, can still dismiss Africa so casually.

African leadership that is bold, self-determining and willing to rise from its knees is an incredible act of revolution. History has shown us, you will be killed for it: Thomas Sankara, Steve Biko, Chris Hani, Patrice Lumumba.

History teaches us that we are not allowed to have strong leadership in Africa. It upsets too many things in the world.

The mediocrity of African leadership in



FUTURE LEADERS: Kenyan delegate Josephine Kulea and audience members attending a Young African Leaders Initiative amid calls for a shift in the orientation and character of African leadership more fundamentally focussed on being true servants of the people, rather than self-serving rulers. PICTURE: FLICKR

our post-colonial context is one that was both anticipated and orchestrated through social engineering. It makes me wonder why we would even expect strong leadership in the absence of a serious project of epistemic and social engineering.

For a continent still revealing to us that it was home to the oldest humans, we are now the youngest.

Africa has the largest number of young people in the world. Can we imagine, can we picture a pan-African realisation of our combined potential, self-organisation, self-mobilisation and self-determination?

Now is perhaps the single greatest opportunity for African youth to recreate our destiny.

To shape a positive and thriving African future. To craft a different space for Africa on the world stage. Instead of trying to catch up with the West, we should assert a new kind of society for Africans.

This is why it is important for us African youth to begin to act upon the world as if we already are its leaders. Because we are. We are the leaders of today.

Tomorrow is too late. Fourteen African countries still paying colonial tax, tells us tomorrow is too far away to act.

That Africans are considered foreigners in Africa, tells us tomorrow is too far to wait. That we have failed to reimagine Africa beyond the colonial system.

That we still must call London, or Paris or Washington before we take decisions that impact us, tells us tomorrow is too far to wait.

We are done with leading Africa on our knees; it is time for African leadership to truly rise in service to its people, than continue with the status quo that asks us to still play in the colonial sandbox.

Instead of big men politics, let us redefine whom we see as legitimate leaders. Instead of pretending there isn't enough to go around, let us shun those who hoard resources.

I feel a deep calling that as African youth, we must come together.

We must set our minds anew and endeavour to move past the point of just critiquing our

leaders. In providing a first step towards solutions to African problems, we must move away from our colonial understanding of being in leadership – as being in power.

Power is a zero sum game.

We must replace this dominance idea of leadership with an understanding of being in leadership as service to all our people.

It is time to write our own future.

Do not retreat from your historical mission; do not surrender to the ease of not doing anything at all.

Asijiki, singagqibanga.

Ashanti Kunene is an intern at the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation and a Stellenbosch University masters student