

Address at the 26th Singapore Lecture, “Africa’s season of hope The dawn of a new Africa-Asia partnership”

Shangri-La Hotel, Singapore, 21 April 2005

Chairperson and Deputy Prime Minister of Singapore, Professor S Jayakumar,
Members of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen:

I would like to thank you most sincerely for the invitation extended to me to deliver this address to such an august gathering under the auspices of the Institute of Southeast Asia Studies. I am very happy because I see this as part of our important engagements that should strengthen ties between Africa and Asia. This has special significance because of the golden jubilee of the Bandung Asia-Africa Conference, which will take place in Indonesia this weekend.

It is indeed important that we have the opportunity to address a Singaporean audience on the eve of the Asia-Africa Summit, as it reminds us of your country’s support when we were given the opportunity to address the members of ASEAN on the African development programme, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), an event that gave rise to the development of a New Asia-Africa Strategic Partnership.

Perhaps it is important that as we focus on the topic of today: ‘Africa’s Season of Hope; The Dawn of a New Asia-Africa Partnership’, we reflect briefly on the history of the colonial mentality, which drove colonialists to act in highly repressive and inhuman fashions towards the colonised. Accordingly, this made it inevitable for those living under colonial rule to mobilise for their liberation, always collaborating with others beyond national borders as well as across the oceans, as was the case with the Bandung Conference, which strengthened bonds of solidarity between Asia and Africa.

As we know, both the peoples of Asia and Africa suffered many years of colonial domination, denial of freedoms and independence and subjugation as well as denigration of their indigenous histories, customs and traditions.

Historian Basil Davidson, writing in his book, *African Civilisation Revisited* says that:

“When our grandchildren reflect on the middle and later years of the twentieth century, above all on the years lying between about 1950 and 1980, and think about us writers of African history, of the history of the black peoples, I think that they will see us as emerging from a time of ignorance and misunderstanding. For these were the liberating years when accounts began at last to be squared with the malice and mystification of racism. And by racism I do not mean, of course, that phalanx of old superstitions, fears and fantasies associated with ancient white ideas about blackness, or not less ancient black ideas about whiteness, the ideas of an old world in which distance always induced distortion. By racism I mean the conscious and systematic weapon of domination, of exploitation, which first saw its demonic rise with the onset of the trans-Atlantic trade in African captives sold into slavery, and which, later, led on to the imperialist colonialism of yesterdays.”

Davidson continues that:
“This racism was not a ‘mistake’, a ‘misunderstanding’ or a ‘grievous deviation from proper norms of behaviour’. It was not an accident of human error. It was not an unthinking reversion to barbarism. On the contrary, this racism was conceived as the moral justification – the necessary justification, as it was seen by those in the white man’s world who were neither thieves nor moral monsters – for doing to black people what church and state no longer thought it permissible to do to white people: the justification for enslaving black people, that is, when it was no longer permissible to enslave white people.”
(PP 3-4)

Indeed, given the racist mentality as described by Davidson, the Bandung Asia-Africa Conference of 1955 fifty years ago, was a necessary and inevitable occasion in the important processes of uniting those living under colonialism to accelerate their struggle for their independence and freedom. Clearly, to reflect fully on a season of hope, it is important that we also look at how far we have gone, collectively, in our global struggle against racism, xenophobia, marginalisation and underdevelopment, because it will be difficult to fully enjoy a season of hope while we still have some among us who are experiencing “the conscious and systematic weapon of domination (and) of exploitation”

At the time of Bandung Conference most of the Asian countries had only emerged from colonial rule, and many African countries were still engaged in bitter struggles for freedom. Today, all these countries are independent and able to take their place as sovereign nations in the community of nations.

In 1955, the principles of racial equality and the right of self-determination of all nations were anything but universally accepted and many, including writers such as Davidson, were only beginning to emerge from ‘a time of ignorance and misunderstanding’ about Africa. Among others, it was Bandung that helped to focus the collective attention of the world to these important principles and to assist with ‘the liberating years when accounts began at last to be squared with the malice and mystification of racism’.

Accordingly, through the fearless and unshakeable co-operation and solidarity between Africa and Asia in international forums such as the UN, the nations of Africa and Asia achieved political and moral victory over colonialism and apartheid.

And so, today we have come here to this Asian crossroads to share and exchange ideas on the current challenges facing our common world, especially the continent of Africa.

In his memoirs “From Third World to First – The Singapore Story 1965 - 2000” Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew remarks on “the long, hard slog ... against seemingly insuperable odds to make it from poverty to prosperity.. .” He recalls the “traumatic experience of race riots” that made him and his colleagues “even more determined to build a multiracial society that would give equally to all citizens, regardless of race, language or religion.” (P12)

These experiences could easily have been recorded by many Africans who faced colonialism and apartheid; who faced race and ethnic clashes as they tried to contribute to a better life for their people. Undoubtedly, these reflections serve to remind us of the similarities in our history and the need to learn from one another.

Although we share a lot in terms of the history of resistance to colonialism, in the past forty years some of the Asian countries have managed, in the main, to overcome the challenge of poverty and underdevelopment while many African countries either stagnated or regressed further into the morass of this poverty and underdevelopment.

The reasons may vary from country to country and region to region. But the main underlying causes have been the deep-rooted legacy of colonialism, neo-colonialism as well as various instances of misrule, autocracy and military dictatorships. These were exacerbated by the international financial mechanisms whose workings put a stranglehold on many economies on our continent, such that in time, Africa became an exporter of capital through among others, the debt repayment to the developed countries.

As a consequence of these debilitating circumstances, a self-perpetuating phenomenon evolved of conflicts and wars, as various groups and powerful individuals with no interest for the ordinary masses, fought for the control of the available resources.

Accordingly, for many decades the images of Africa have been those of military coups and counter coups, civil wars, refugees and all the indecencies that accompany wars and conflicts. As if that was not enough, as the ordinary masses put a collective prayer for rain to bless their crops, unprecedented droughts and

devastating floods seemed to conspire as they alternated to ravage the African landscape with some recurrent cruelty. As a result, hunger, famine and disease defined the existence of many Africans.

Indeed, while some countries in Asia, such as Singapore, were enjoying a season of hope, many of their counterparts on the African continent were experiencing a cruel coincidence of human-made tragedies and natural disasters.

However, as the topic of the lecture says, today is Africa's Season of Hope; and we will work together to ensure that the Dawn of a New Asia-Africa Partnership is not merely a slogan but a living reality.

We are saying that this is Africa's season of hope because many among us who have been following events on the African continent in the past fifteen years, will agree that, unlike in the decades earlier, our continent is experiencing an important era away from the problems of the past, into the possibility of a better and prosperous future.

The IMF's World Economic Outlook 2005 has a topic, 'Africa: Turning The Corner?' and has this to say about Africa:

"In sub-Saharan Africa, real GDP growth accelerated to 5.1 percent in 2004, the highest in almost a decade. Growth has been underpinned by the strength of the global economy, including high oil and commodity prices, improved domestic macroeconomic policies and progress with structural reforms, and the ending of several protracted armed conflicts. ...Inflation continued to decline, reaching single digits in 2004, the lowest rate for nearly three decades...." (PP45-46)

Continuing to explain this season of hope on the African continent, the same IMF report also says:

"The encouraging growth performance in recent years has renewed optimism that sub-Saharan Africa may be entering a period of strong and sustained expansion. Per capita income growth in sub-Saharan Africa has accelerated and become positive over the past five years – a significant improvement compared with the previous two decades when sub-Saharan Africa recorded the worst growth performance among developing country regions."

Chairperson,

This positive outlook described by the IMF has been possible because of the collective efforts of the African people from all stations in life – political leaders, businesspeople, the intelligentsia, workers, women, youth, rural and urban people.

In the past decade and a half, these African people resolved that they themselves have to change things for the better; that they have to bring to an end this image of chaos and instability that define themselves and their continent.

Because of this new resolve to act together for the regeneration of the African continent, there was, among other things, a resurgent of an important Africa-wide democratic movement, given impetus by the almost complete liberation of the continent with South Africa's freedom.

This democratic movement which could not be defined merely through specific organisations, represented the feelings and aspirations of the majority of our people. It was given concrete expression by the evolution of strong multi-party systems of democracy, the revival of a vibrant civil society with women, youth, intelligentsia and workers occupying their pride of place in the on-going discourse on the renaissance of their continent. It was further manifested through a new political culture of openness, of debate and the willingness to confront even the most difficult questions.

Within this milieu, Africa also saw the emergence of a new generation of democratically elected leaders who were and still are committed to deepen democratic ideals, entrench peoples and human rights and ensure that good governance and the rule of law become permanent features of Africa's political life. Undoubtedly, a new season of hope had arrived.

Further, to change this Africa for the better, this new generation also had to combine two essential things.

First, they had to do what many previous African leaders had done very well, namely to continue to take pride in their African roots and put into proper perspective the history of their continent, which had suffered enormous distortions in the past. Second, they had to combine this African pride with the reality of mastering and putting into practical use the political, economic and social systems of the modern world for the benefit of their countries and peoples.

This leadership knew and still knows that taking pride in one's history, cultures and traditions is not a negation of modernity. Indeed, the Asians are a good example of people who moved into modern times without abandoning their history and traditions.

Writing in the mid-1990's about the challenges of culture and modernity, Mahmood Mamdani, in his book *Citizen and Subject*, said that:

"Discussions on Africa's present predicament revolve around two clear tendencies: modernist and communitarian. Modernists take inspiration from the East European uprisings of the late eighties; communitarians decry liberal or left Eurocentrism and call for a return to the source. For modernists, the problem is that civil society is an embryonic and marginal construct in Africa; for communitarians, it is that real flesh-and-blood communities that comprise Africa are marginalised from public life as so many 'tribes'. The liberal solution is to locate politics in civil society, and the Africanist solution is to put Africa's age-old communities at the centre of African politics. One side calls for a regime that will champion rights, and the other stands in defence of culture. The impasse in Africa is not only at the level of practical politics. It is also a paralysis of perspective." (P3)

This type of debate still takes place in many forums on the African continent. Luckily, many people have come to terms with the fact that the different positions, in this theoretical 'impasse', as Mamdani calls it – between modernists and communitarians or between Eurocentrists and Africanists – are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, both parts reflect an important African challenge as we strengthen democracy in our countries.

Clearly, the season of hope will not be sustainable if we gloss over the specificity of our African reality; a reality that should strengthen the political, economic and social systems which we practice. Fortunately, many African scholars, traditionalists and politicians are engaged in an on-going critique of, as well as affirming both these positions so that the democratic and governance systems of our countries become responsive both to local conditions as well as modern challenges.

Further, this new leadership from business, workers, women, youth and politics, is everyday hard at work to address the critical challenge to help bring a better life to millions of poor Africans, always impatient with the lack of progress or with occasional setbacks of conflicts, or misrule and corruption.

It is a leadership whose sense of purpose is driven by the lost decades of the past, when, for various reasons, Africa could not take advantage of global progress towards development and prosperity. It is as if this leadership is inspired by the African writer, Ben Okri, when he says in his book, 'Mental Flight',

"A moment unremarked by the universe,
By nature, the seasons, or stars.
Moment we have marked out
In timelessness.

Human moment.
Making a ritual, a drama, a tear
On eternity.
Domesticating the infinite.
Contemplating the quantum questions,
Time, death, new beginnings,
Regeneration, cycles, the unknown.

...So it is with this moment.
A gigantic death
And an enormous birth.
This mighty moment.
In timelessness.”

We are talking about a season of hope because Africans dare to ensure that there was a ‘gigantic death’ of the numerous bad practises of the past that prolonged the nightmare of poverty and underdevelopment of ordinary people.

We are able to talk about a season of hope because there are many Africans who contemplated the quantum questions on democracy, culture, peoples and human rights and the rule of law.

As they did this, they resolved that the time had come to bring to an end those practices that worked against the development and possible prosperity of the African people. A ‘new beginning’ and ‘an enormous birth’ had to come. This break with the past was critical because at the dawn of the 21st century, the poverty and underdevelopment in Africa continued to be a blight on the rest of humanity, especially in the face of the prosperity and development of the rich countries of the North.

As we rounded-off the last century and embraced the new one, Africa was still politically and economically marginalised with the majority of Africans still living in grinding poverty and underdevelopment.

Half of the 800 million people on the African continent lived on less than US\$1 per day while the mortality rate of children under five years of age was 140 per 1000. Only 58 percent of the population had access to safe water. The rate of illiteracy for people over 15 was 41 percent and there were only 18 mainline telephones per 1000 people compared with 146 for the world and 567 for developed countries.

(Source: NEPAD document)

Indeed, in the past a number of interventions were made to try to address the underdevelopment of Africa. Most of these interventions were done with noble intentions to pull the continent from the quagmire of poverty. Yet, these were designed by outsiders for Africans, with little input from the Africans themselves.

Having learned from history and faced with the stark reality of ever deepening poverty levels, as Africans, we decided that we will formulate our own agenda for development, taking into account programmes that have been tried in the past, retaining those that have worked well and discarding the failed ones.

In this regard, we transformed the Organisation of the African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU) and thus moved from an era in African politics whose dominant feature was the concentration of energies and resources for the unity of the continent and the total liberation of all our countries, towards a new period of using our collective strength to work for peace and stability, to strengthen democracy, to ensure respect for peoples rights and to embark on a far-reaching programme of the regeneration and development of all our countries.

Clearly, this needed a new type of organisation, such as the African Union, with a fresh mandate, appropriate institutions and the necessary capacity to face the contemporary continental and international challenges.

To respond to the critical challenge of widespread poverty and underdevelopment facing many African countries, an AU development programme, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) was formulated. This programme was initiated by the African political leadership who made the commitment that:

"The New Partnership for Africa's Development is a pledge by African leaders, based on a common vision and a firm and shared conviction, that they have a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and place their countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development and, at the same time, to participate actively in the world economy and body politic. The programme is anchored on the determination of Africans to extricate themselves and the continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a globalising world."

Over a period of time different sections of our societies on the continent, conducted rigorous discussions on this programme making their own critiques and suggestions as to how it could be strengthened, especially at the implementation level.

Through NEPAD there is an on-going work to address the various critical developmental challenges such as telecommunication, water, energy, transport infrastructure, human resources development, including work on expanding access to education, especially for rural communities, access to ICTs, improving the health infrastructure and paying special attention to communicable diseases such as TB, AIDS and Malaria and working together to ensure that our countries are able to access affordable drugs.

As many of us would know, one of the critical challenges on the African continent is the issue of food security. Among others, this means the improvement of infrastructure and putting more resources on the agricultural sector to ensure better capacity and efficiency.

Related to this is the important matter of market access to the markets of the developed nations. In this regard, it is important to address and resolve the issue of agricultural subsidies given to farmers in developed countries.

I am confident that we will agree to strengthen our alliance and collaboration with countries such as Singapore and other Asian countries for our mutual benefit, especially in the next round of WTO negotiations.

Chairperson,

The writer, John Reader, refers to the earlier times when there was trade between Africans and outsiders who found gold and other minerals on the African continent. He writes that:

"European mariners and merchants not only had visited Africa but also had published accounts of their voyages that described personal encounters with the peoples of the coastal areas. They had met African kings, had made friends with ordinary people, had dined on oysters, and had brought back pepper, gold dust, and ivory." (P320, Africa - A biography of the Continent)

He continues that:

"In 1554 John Lock captained a voyage to West Africa and returned with 'four hundred pound weight and odd of gold, of twenty-two carats and one grain in fineness ...'" (P321)

As we know there are many instances of Asians, Arabs and Europeans venturing into the African continent in search of the precious metals.

Accordingly, many of us are very familiar with the mineral riches of the African continent. I am certain that we are also aware that in the past century or so, the beneficiation of these minerals has, for many years been done exclusively in countries outside Africa, especially in Europe.

Today, as part of this programme of the development of the African industrial base, we have begun a process of building strong capacity in polishing, cutting as well as engaging in other aspects of value-addition in the mining industry.

This is important if we are to move our continent from being only a supplier of raw materials into being an important player in the value chain of producing finished products.

To return to Ben Okri:

“So it is with this moment
A gigantic death
And an enormous birth.
This mighty moment.
In timelessness.

As I have indicated, we come from decades in which some of our countries were characterised by autocracy, military coups and general disregard for the democratic ideals. As part of this moment of ‘A gigantic death’, we had to bring to an end the unacceptable situation of people assuming power by force or through undemocratic means.

Our continental body the OAU and the AU when it was formed have already taken firm action against those who have taken power through un-constitutional means. The African leadership had to intervene in the Comoros, the Central African Republic and Togo when these countries experienced un-constitutional change of governments. We also intervened in Liberia when lawlessness and banditry seemed to take root. This is clearly part of Africa’s ‘enormous birth, the mighty moment in timelessness’.

In addition to this position, we have also, through NEPAD, initiated what we call The African Peer Review Mechanism. The primary purpose of the Peer Review Mechanism is to ensure the adoption of policies, standards and practices that lead to political and social stability, high economic growth through the sharing of experiences and the reinforcement of successful and best practices.

The Peer Review includes the identification of deficiencies and weaknesses in our political, economic and social systems and then offering proposals for improvement. It is in reality a self-assessment mechanism available to those who are willing to seek assistance for the benefit of their countries and peoples.

Africa’s season of hope is also predicated on the critical matters of peace, stability and democracy. In this regard, we have created some of the important organs of the AU, including the Peace and Security Council and the Pan African Parliament (PAP).

Already, the Peace and Security Council is playing an important role in some of the conflict areas on the continent. The AU is working to bring permanent peace to the Cote d’Ivoire and in collaboration with the UN to do the same in the Darfur region in Sudan.

Again, as part of entrenching and consolidating democracy on the continent we have worked tirelessly with the people of the DRC and Burundi. We are happy that during the course of this year both countries will be holding democratic elections, ensuring that there is ‘A gigantic death’ to decades of conflicts and

autocracy, and bringing a new beginning of 'An enormous birth, a mighty moment in timelessness'. All these indicate the reality that Africans are prepared to deal with African problems in this season of hope.

In addition, the Pan African Parliament is critical because African law-makers are for the first time able to sit down together and deal with issues facing the continent always complementing other institutions as we ensure that the season of hope is not but a mirage.

Chairperson,

For our efforts to succeed in all that we are doing, we have placed special emphasis on the need for partnerships between and within the African countries, between Africa and other developing countries, between Africa and Asia, and between Africa and the developed world.

Naturally, these partnerships would take various forms such as business to business, government to government, people to people, regional partnerships and other important forms.

Accordingly, for us to make real the topic of today, "Africa's season of Hope; The Dawn of a New Asia-Africa Partnership" we should strengthen our partnerships at all levels, between governments, between various institutions of research and innovation, of universities, of civil society organs and of businesses.

We will agree that we need to do all these because we have a pressing duty to collaborate so as to banish hunger, disease, poverty and underdevelopment from the face of the earth.

Of importance, we need to work together to ensure that:

- There are resource transfers to poor regions of the world in the same manner that massive capital transfers helped Europe after the Second World War as well as the 'Asian Tigers' in the 1960's and 1970's.
- There is implementation of international agreements, especially the Millennium Development Goals;
- The Monterrey agreements on development financing are implemented as a matter of urgency;
- There is debt cancellation, especially for the Highly Indebted Poor Countries.

Chairperson;

Let me reiterate that even with all these challenges, this is Africa's season of hope; and I repeat why!

- The process of democratisation is irreversible;
- Unlike in the past, Africans are now building a peaceful and stable continent by dealing swiftly with incidents of conflict and instability as well as creating strong institutions for this purpose;
- Economic growth is on the rise in most countries with correct national macro-economic fundamentals and investor-friendly conditions in place;
- The development programme of the continent through NEPAD, has gathered momentum with concrete support from partners as demonstrated by such programmes as the G8 Africa Plan of Action;
- We have begun a programme to utilise our ecological and natural resources in a sustainable way as well as using our limited capital resources to fund infrastructure projects.

For us to demonstrate that the New Asia-Africa Partnership is for all seasons, let us begin to work closely together as we review the Millennium Declaration and the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals later this year.

Let us also collaborate during the discussions of the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations dealing with the consolidated Report called, In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All. In this context I think we will all agree that we should work together for the reform not only of the UN, but also of all multilateral institutions.

As we engage in all these processes, the question billions of people will keep on asking is whether we will say, like Ben Okri, there is 'a gigantic death' to inertia when it comes to dealing with global poverty; there is 'a gigantic death' to inequalities in global governance.

These billions of people throughout the globe will also ask whether the leaders of the world have summoned enough courage to embark on a new beginning of 'an enormous birth, of a mighty moment in timelessness'!

With your participation and encouragement and taking advantage of this season of hope, I am confident that we can and will chart a new beginning to achieve sustainable development of our continent and the improvement of all our people!

Thank you.