Address at the Nigerian Institute of International Affairs

Abuja, 3 October 2000

Your Excellency Vice-President Atiku Abubakar,
Honourable Ministers,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Democracy and Renaissance in Africa: In search of an enduring Pax Africana

Thank you for inviting me to come and share with you some thoughts about the important topic of Democracy and the Renaissance in Africa.

An important document of our liberation struggle, adopted at a Congress of the People in 1955, is called the Freedom Charter. Among its clauses, it contains the important provision that The People Shall Govern!

In the course of our struggle, this was expressed in the mobilising slogan - Power to the People!

Across our border, in Zimbabwe, the sister liberation movement of that country emphasised the concept that - the People are their own Liberators!

It is from this tradition that I come. It is this tradition that we seek to represent and advance at all times. This is a progressive tradition according to which as a movement we do not fear the people but strive at all times to empower them to act as a conscious force for their own all-round emancipation.

Tyrants fear the masses and will always seek to demobilise them through propaganda, bribery and terror. Our task as progressives is to oppose these tyrants.

Accordingly, the concept of democracy is fundamental to the very character of the political formations to which we belong. Without an attachment to democracy, they would cease to be what they have been, which enabled them successfully to mobilise the people to defeat colonialism and apartheid.

It is from this perspective that we will try to address the topic we have been given.

When students of history look back to the past few years, I am sure that they will be able to see beyond the conflicts in the great Lakes Region.

They will see beyond the savage brutality of those who terrorised and mercilessly killed and maimed innocent people, especially women and children in Sierra Leone.

They will see beyond the unspeakable genocide that took place in Rwanda which took place while the world watched as though this was nothing but the swatting of a fly.

They will see something beyond the never-ending war in Angola.

The students of history will see something other than the negative news of disease and hunger that dominate news headlines in the countries of the North, as if so say that the single definition of Africa is calamity.

What will they see!

They will see that in the last decade of the second millennium, the African Renaissance, the renewal of the continent started however hesitantly.

An important and critical element of this Renaissance is that in the last few years we have witnessed a widespread democratic awakening in all parts of our continent.

Today, many countries have gone through more than one multi-party election since 1990. The movement towards the consolidation and deepening of this democracy continues apace, whatever the interruptions and occasional setbacks.

Critical to this democratic renaissance in many parts of Africa has been the role of the masses of our people, acting through their formations, who have fought to en destructive and undemocratic systems of government.

Through their heroic struggles, these masses have ensured that Africa experiences her second liberation in decades, while at the same time creating the possibility for the establishment of stable democratic systems of governments, political accountability and respect for human rights.

Clearly, it is important that all us should strengthen this movement towards a democratic continent and through our daily actions make certain that the democratic wave becomes an unstoppable and irreversible tide.

In this regard and among other things, we need to energise the masses to reinforce the positions taken by Africa's leaders to banish from the OAU, those who assume power through coups d'etat.

At the same time, we must be vigilant and guard against any possibility of complacency because even though we have prevailed over undemocratic forces in many parts of our continent, we can see that reversals are possible as demonstrated less than twelve months ago in the Cote d'Ivoire.

In the critical work Imagining Insiders the following story is told by Mineke Schipper:

> "Olofi created the world and all the things in it. He created beautiful things and ugly things. He created Truth and Falsehood. He made Truth big and powerful, but he made Falsehood skinny and weak. And he made them enemies. He gave Falsehood a cutlass, unbeknownst to Truth.
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> "One day, the two met and started fighting. Truth, being so big and powerful, felt confident and also very complacent since he didn't know that Falsehood had a cutlass.
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> "So Falsehood cunningly cut off Truth's head. This jolted and enraged Truth and he started scrambling around for his head. He stumbled on Falsehood and, knocking him down, Truth felt the head of Falsehood which he took to be his own. His strength being truly awesome, a mere pull from Truth yanked off the head of Falsehood and this Truth placed on his own neck. And from that day what we have is this grotesque and confusing mismatch: the body of Truth; the head of Falsehood."

As we consolidate, strengthen and spread democracy throughout Africa, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of lowering our democratic guard thus allowing the undemocratic forces, which always will have a hidden 'cutlass', to do what 'Falsehood' did to 'Truth' in the story we have just told.

We need to ensure that these undemocratic forces are not able to smuggle themselves into power such that, like in our story, we end up with the monstrosity that we have seen around Africa, with the head of 'Falsehood' and the body of 'Truth'.

Central to the achievement of this objective must be the education of the masses of our people truly to understand their interests, as well as their organisation and mobilisation so that they are able to act, at all times, in defence of those interests.

Thus would these masses not allow that those who seek to dominate take advantage of the dust occasioned by the struggle for democracy, opportunistically to steal power from the people and place it in their own hands.

Consciousness by the masses of their interests would also help to ensure that the processes of fundamental social change in which our Continent must engage are not derailed by demagogues who thrive on making false promises, exploiting the burning aspirations of the people for a better life.

As part of the building and consolidation of democracy, we necessarily must move from the African reality, from the truths that we see and know in our countries and continent, and, be able to tell them from the falsehoods.

We need to retain a memory of our past, which should invariably inform our vision for the future as we intensify the struggle for the development and advancement of our countries.

Clearly, one of the critical elements of the process of deepening democracy is to build, nurture and strengthen indigenous institutions of research, information gathering and dissemination, including the media.

Our own experience tells us that as long as these important institutions are owned and controlled by people other than Africans, we will fail to end the distortions about ourselves; distortions that lead to the disempowerment of our people, to self-hate and confusion about what we ought to do to advance our development.

As long as these institutions are not informed by African Realities it will be difficult to produce appropriate solutions to our problems. I would like to suggest that we, ourselves, should look at ways of building these institutions that would assist in the process of democratic consolidation.

These institutions may also help in monitoring democracy, identifying threats, criticising fearlessly where things go wrong and suggesting ways and means of improving democratic rule where it is weak and be a resource for all of us.

Our democratic processes need to address this shortcoming if we are to reverse the Afro-pessimism that prevails in many parts of the world as well as on our own continent, a situation that often leads to ambivalence, despondency and a feeling of hopelessness among our people.

This is to say that we have a responsibility to ensure that our people do not assume the head of Falsehood.

Paulo Freire in The Pedagogy of the Oppressed says that:

> "An epoch is characterised by a complex of ideas, concepts, hopes, doubts, values, and challenges in dialectical interaction with their opposites, striving towards plenitude. The concrete representation of many of these ideas, values, concepts, and hopes, as well as the obstacles which impede the people's full humanisation, constitute the themes of that epoch. These themes imply others which are opposing or even antithetical; they also indicate tasks to be carried out and fulfilled."

The challenge to our intelligentsia, and indeed to all of us is therefore, to ensure that in this epoch, the ideas, concepts and hopes of our people are not distorted, because the very act of distortion is a threat to our democracy and development. Freire continues by explaining that:

> "As antagonism deepens between themes which are the expression of reality, there is a tendency for the themes and for reality to be mythicized, establishing a climate of irrationality and sectarianism... In such a situation, myth-creating irrationality itself becomes a fundamental theme. Its opposing theme, the critical and dynamic view of the world, strives to unveil reality, unmask its mythicization, and achieve the full realisation of the human task: the permanent transformation of reality in favour of the liberation of people."

If indeed we view democracy as a vital element of the humanisation process, then the way in which people should account to each other to express their human needs and thus best "achieve the full realisation of the human task" in our present time, is crucial.

Chairperson,

The organisation of political power must be such as to favour a dynamic approach to the unveiling reality as it exists, the truths that it reveals to us and the changing ways in which we grapple with this reality to further our human development.

One of the realities of our continent is the tendency to use ethnicity and religion for political mobilisation and access to power. For many years this tendency has contributed to the continued strife and disunity as those who felt marginalised by the dominant groups mobilize against their exclusion from political power and access to resources.

This problem has faced almost every part of our continent, and the manner in which different countries dealt with it has been critical to the stability of each country.

It is therefore our task to ensure that as we work for the renewal of our continent, we should continue to seek the best effective ways of addressing this problem of dispensing political power, privilege and in most instances wealth which has been according to the ethnic and religious identities of various sectors of our peoples.

Clearly, the consolidation of democracy is also dependent on the strength and maturity of political parties. In situations where there is an absence of strong, mass-based political parties, it has been easier for undemocratic forces to impose their will on the rest of society.

In addition, parties that are not rooted in the ideology that is informed by the plight and concerns of poor people, are unable to respond to the challenges of underdevelopment and poverty.

This failure must surely lead to the betrayal of the interests of the people, the elevation of those of the elite and therefore resort to repression to suppress the dissatisfied masses of the people and the encouragement of a false consciousness among the people to lead them away from recognition of their true interests.

It is important therefore, that as we consolidate our democracies and use them as necessary platforms for the acceleration of our development, that the progressive movement ensures that the orientation of our parties is informed by the need to empower the masses of our people, so that they themselves can participate as a conscious force in renaissance of Africa.

As leaders in different fields, it is incumbent on us to ensure that our people, wherever they are, acquire sufficient capacity to identify this moment of our re-awakening as a continent, and, be able, themselves, to participate fully in the unfolding process.

The movement for our renewal will gather speed once we are able to harness the tremendous potential and energy of the ordinary people.

The possibility for our programmes to bring about the rebirth for all can only be understood clearly and possessed by those who are conscious of their own powers as actors on the continental stage, as thinkers who realise that their dreams of prosperity are enhanced by interaction with other Africans.

Chairperson,

In Citizens and Subject, the Ugandan scholar, Mahmood Mamdami says that:

> "To understand the nature of struggle and agency, one needs to understand the nature of power."

Whether the organisation of power still reflected the colonial legacy, whether the form of the independent state was deeply shaped by the African colonial experience are questions we must still grapple with, for they may explain past failures and point the way to present and future successes.

The recognition of these connections, between past and present in the exercise of power must at the very least enable us to be in a position of control over the organisation of power.

We must be in a position to create democratic systems appropriate to the African reality.

Furthermore, we must recognise the fact that the organisation of power and how democracy is practised in any given time are surely influenced and shaped by the arrangements of economic power within our societies and globally.

In this context, there can be no genuine democratic empowerment of the people without economic empowerment.

The poverty of our people throughout the continent, both as a result of colonialism and through neo-colonialism and their continue impoverishment today, constitutes a loss of power by the people.

This has led to an inability by these masses to exercise their rights to the fullest extent, being pre-occupied with a hand-to-mouth existence, the difficult struggle to survive. Many of those who reside in the developed nations of the world, do not have to worry about their basic needs such as food security, welfare and basic amenities. Under these favourable economic circumstances, conditions exist for the further entrenchment of democracy.

Hence the proliferation of movements that are vocal on all manner of issues as represented by organisations of civil society and numerous NGOs. Undoubtedly, this situation contributes, in many respects, to the deepening of democracy within a country.

It is therefore important that we sustain a speedy movement towards the attainment of a better life for all our people. Among other things, we need to use our resources to empower our people with education, knowledge and information, so that they become their own liberators and participate in the reconstruction of both their lives and the lives of their countries. In this way, they will be able to participate fully in and strengthen then democratic processes.

It is important that all of us, in all our various countries, that our understanding of Africa now and Africa's future must move towards a commonality, leading, among other things, to strengthen our economic ties and relations.

In addition, we must build an Africa that shares a common vision for a more human, caring society freed of dictatorship, warfare and military upheavals, where there is a desire among all that the conflicts that will exist will be resolved peacefully.

At the same time, for our people to have the space to participate in the processes of the renaissance, they must live in conditions of peace and stability throughout the continent.

John Stremlau, an American scholar at a South African university, in his essay "African Renaissance and International Relations" has this to say:

> "None of the political disasters afflicting African in recent years were inevitable, nor do any more have to be. Surmounting the legacies of colonialism remains a complex challenge for many communities, but at least no future imperial threats loom. Resolving current crises and preventing new ones will require much broader and deeper forms of intra-African co-operation.
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> "If successful, an African renaissance will finally bring an enduring pax africana and the promise of evolving political frameworks that will allow the continent's rich cultural diversity to flourish. Only then can inescapable forces of economic and technological globalisation be managed and eventually turned to advantage at all levels of African society."

We would agree that one of the most important challenges facing Africa today is to achieve a comprehensive and sustained peace, and ensure that we arrive at an enduring pax africana, for democracy and sustained development are possible only in conditions of peace and stability.

It should also be one of our common tasks, but especially those among us who consider themselves as progressives, to work together for the entrenchment of a culture of peace in our regions, countries, our communities and our continent.

The resolution of conflicts can be expedited if the whole of society and all sectors mediated and, alongside their government, work towards, and enduring peace.

Accordingly, we have to strengthen our regional and continental structures, so that we are able, ourselves, to ensure that we bring to an end all these unnecessary wars and conflicts and that the energies of our people are directed at the questions of development and advancement of our societies.

Furthermore, in the age of globalisation and the power of communication and information technology, we need to find concrete ways of harnessing this new phenomenon for the advancement and enrichment of our democracies as our ally in the straggle for an African renaissance.

We should do so while remaining true to ourselves, retaining our identity, our culture, our values and concepts. We have to exploit the huge potential offered by the new situation to attain and sustain the full participation of all our people in all our democratic processes.

Finally, the challenges of the Renaissance means that we have to work hard to bring about sustained socio-economic development, put an end to the poverty afflicting millions of the African people, increase the capacity of our economies and strengthen our democracies.

It means that we must empower people so that they become activists for people-centred development. It means that we have to activate the intelligentsia so as to play the important role of conceptualising, formulating and articulating our thoughts and plans for the renaissance.

It means mobilising our business people to play the critical role, themselves as agents of the continental rebirth. It means bringing all the women into the centre of this epoch-making process because, as we are all aware, the extent of our social transformation and development will be measured by the degree to which the goal of the emancipation of women is realised.

It means ensuring that the workers, as an important component of our economies and societies, as well as their trade unions, play their critical and independent role.

It means channelling the energy and exuberance of the youth so that they who represent the future must begin to built that better future today.

The African Renaissance is not just a dream waiting to happen in some distant future, it is already unfolding before our very eyes. Like any process, it will experience temporary setbacks and reversals.

Also, this renaissance will not happen in a flash, as an event, nor can we judge its success or failure in a matter of few years. It is going to take time spanning several generations.

But most importantly, our rebirth will need a lot of effort and it is critical that all of us must find for ourselves a role so that together we should be able to accelerate this process and ensure that we, as Africans, begin to occupy our pride of place amongst the peoples of the world.

We can and must do it!

Thank you.