



TANA HIGH-LEVEL FORUM ON SECURITY IN AFRICA

## Reflections on Late President Kwame Nkrumah's Pan-Africanism Legacy

**Ali A. Mufuruki, Chairman and CEO Infotech Investment Group LTD., TANZANIA**

Please allow me to begin by thanking the Chairperson of the Tana High-Level Forum on Security in Africa, His Excellency former President of Nigeria, General Olusegun Obasanjo and the management of the Forum for the kind invitation extended to me to deliver the 2015 edition of the Annual Lecture Series dedicated to the memory of the late Ethiopian Prime Minister, Mr. Meles Zenawi. Your presence at this event is a strong testimony of your respect and abiding commitment to honouring the work, life and memory of one of modern Africa's greatest sons, after whom this lecture series is named. And it is my hope that what I am going to say today about yet another extraordinary African, will live up, not only to your expectations, but also it will be a useful addition to the continuous effort of understanding and properly documenting the essence of good leadership in Africa, by learning from the examples, both good and bad, of those who have come and gone before us.

Before I proceed, may I request you to join me in observing a minute of silence for our fellow African brothers and sisters who have been murdered, hacked, raped and burnt alive in South Africa this week. Let us pray for the safety of the many who are in hiding, being hunted down like animals as I speak. Let us also pray for those who are nursing their wounds as they try to recover from the terrible trauma that has been inflicted upon them by fellow Africans, black Africans I must add. This week, we have seen the flickering flame of the Pan Africanism dream finally extinguished, at least for me. It will take a great effort to revive this dream, if at all.

Speaking at this same forum last year during his lecture, Mr. Adebayo Olukoshi quoted Lord Acton in one of his famous letters written in April 1887 and said that " great men are almost always bad men." He went on to add his own interpretation of those words noting, inter alia, that



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"great leaders are invariably controversial, forceful personalities, ahead of their time and generation." I agree with his observations of human behavior; and, in particular, his characterisation of leaders, because such a definition allows us to have an honest and frank conversation about our leaders and other important personalities whose presence and passing through this world can only be misrepresented at our own peril.

Kwame Nkrumah was a great man of monumental proportions. He was quintessentially inspirational, charismatic with incomparable oratory skills; a political and tactical genius; a brave freedom fighter and capable political mobiliser; a brilliant strategist and thinker who more than anyone in history inspired the fight for political independence across the continent. He was one of the pioneer proponents of the idea of a single, independent and united Africa without colonial borders, an idea whose aspirational and inspirational value has not been diminished by the passage of time. Rather, it will continue to engage future generations as long as that goal of African unity remains elusive.

In this sense, Nkrumah was the foremost and most vocal advocate of Pan Africanism of his time, having famously said on Ghana's day of independence on March 6, 1957, that his country's freedom would remain meaningless as long as other African countries remained under the yoke of imperialism and colonization. Many in his shoes at that time would just have been satisfied with such momentous event as Ghana's independence but not Nkrumah. It was a very bold, very courageous thing to say, especially on that special day. He was in many ways ahead of his time. He saw the possibility of full independence at a time when the colonial masters were looking forward to holding onto Africa as their property for at least another 100 years. His partners in the struggle for independence thought he was too impatient but he lived to prove them wrong.

I would however consider it a grave travesty of history to speak only about Nkrumah's glorious



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achievements and erase from memory his tragic failings- both as a person and as a leader. In dwelling on the latter, my intention is not to denigrate his accomplishments but to point out how our persona as individuals or leaders can sometimes diverge, with far-fetched outcomes. After all, leaders are first and foremost human beings with our baggage of indulgencies, limitations and failings. So, if we dwell on the life and work of Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah at the forefront of pan-Africanism, we must also pause to reflect on what he did wrong, or could have done differently if the time and context were different. In my view, Kwame Nkrumah was famously controversial, impatient, arrogant and distrustful of others to the point of being paranoid. Like many leaders, he was forceful not always in a way that his opponents wanted. Perhaps even a small few at the receiving end of his sharp political stick would remember him as a vain, corrupt, dictatorial and ultimately failed African leader. He therefore fits Lord Acton's characterisation as a great but controversial and enigmatic leader.

### **Pan Africanism and the Search for Authentic African Heroes**

I must confess from the outset that I am not a good student of history, especially of the political category. My formal training as a mechanical engineer did not prepare me well for this kind of assignment. I have therefore spent the past few weeks reflecting on the history and trajectory of Pan Africanism, from the days of the progenitors of the idea like Markus Garvey, William Wallace, Kwame Nkrumah, to date. I have pondered what pan Africanism meant in different historical moments, past and present; and what the future holds for this contested idea, in theory and practice. I do not, of course, claim any monopoly of knowledge on the subject of pan-Africanism but my active engagements within Africa, from the perspective of a citizen and businessman, spanning over four decades, puts me in the right stead to air my candid views, fully conscious of the controversies that would most likely ensue.



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Perhaps laying bare my own ignorance of African history; the kind of dangerous ignorance that I am afraid is shared by many members of my generation of Africans, I was surprised, disappointed and petrified by what I found. Surprised because what I found to be the most disturbing revelations about Kwame Nkrumah have actually been part of the public record for many years. I was disappointed because in reading about Kwame Nkrumah, I had hoped to find a flawless, compelling, inspirational story of authentic African heroism but ended up with one punctuated by a rather cautionary tale of premature celebration of leadership work that is much talked about but was never done. I was disappointed with the rush to glorify outcomes that are more of a creative imagination of the continent's collective hopes and aspirations than accomplished reality. Finally, I was petrified because I doubted very much if the Tana Forum was the right platform, or even the right time, for me to openly share my grim discoveries. I even considered pulling out of this role because it is not my intention to offend anyone so publicly, let alone the memories of a towering figure of modern African history such as Nkrumah. I thank the Forum management for assuring me that this is indeed the right place and the right time, even for an itinerant ideas man such as me to speak and be heard. I am very grateful for those assurances

### **Nkrumah: The Unmaking of an African Hero**

The focus of my lecture today is to reflect on Kwame Nkrumah's Pan Africanism credential and legacy. In the quest to do justice to the theme, I have gone back in time to look at Ghana's history, in part because I believe that ancient Ghana tells a much more powerful story of Pan Africanism than contemporary Ghana. I have read extensively books written about Nkrumah, including those penned by his admirers and critics alike. I have read his own magisterial speeches, articles and books articulating his views on diverse issues; from those on African independence to the economy as well as his dreams and fears for the continent. I have read articles and books written by objective, neutral researchers and academics whose intention was merely to document as



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correctly as possible, what happened during Nkrumah's life on this earth, his accomplishments and also where he fell short. It might be that his critics were rather unsparing, even impatient as

he too was, to appreciate the demands of the moment that Nkrumah and several of his first generation peers lived, and what such times demanded of leaders. In one instance, one commentary lamented that: "[Though] he effected Ghana's independence and for a decade was Africa's foremost spokesman, his vainglory and dictatorial methods brought about his downfall in 1966, with him went a discredited and tragic figure in African nationalism." In equal measure, it might be that his admirers and loyalists were too happy to bask in the excitement of Nkrumah's popularity to see his shortfalls.

Most writers break down Nkrumah's life into four sections beginning with his early years that continue up to his graduation from University in the US and the beginning of his political awareness when he moved to the United Kingdom. The second part sees him return home from the UK in 1947 to become a member of the Gold Coast political movement up to 1957 when Ghana became an independent country under his leadership as Prime Minister. The third period comprises the years of Nkrumah's rule over Ghana up to his ouster from power in 1966. Finally, his last six years of exile, sickness and death at the unripe age of 62 years in 1972.

As I searched for Nkrumah's pan Africanist credentials, I had to focus on the third period of his life, between 1957 and 1966 when he was President of newly independent Ghana; and for all intents and purposes, the undisputed leader of Independent Africa. The momentous political, social and economic events his home country, and across Africa, during this period capture most accurately, in my view, what Kwame Nkrumah was as a person and as a leader of his people. Let me share with you, chronologically, how the defining events of that decade have been captured by historians.



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**1957**

Immediately after independence, Nkrumah embarked on a campaign to give himself maximum political power that would soon see him rule his country unchallenged and unrestrained. He amended the 1957 constitution by removing the special entrenchment clause giving the legislature that was already dominated by his political party CPP, powers to effect any constitutional changes ]

it deemed necessary and these followed in short order: abolition of regional assemblies; dilution of clauses designed to ensure a non-political and competitive civil service; appointment of friends, tribesmen and political followers into the upper ranks of public service; and the creation of an obedient and dominant party majority in the assembly.

In the same year, Parliament passed the Deportation Act. Although it was supposed to be applied to non-Ghanaians whose presence in the country was deemed inimical to the public good, several of those deported were actually Ghanaian citizens both by birth and by law. The law, worse still, set a precedent for the deportations and revenge deportations that Nigerians, Ivorians and numerous other African countries were to engage in many years later, disrupting the livelihoods of millions of people. Each event, in my view, dealt a devastating blow to the Pan-Africanist dream of a united and free Africa.

**1958**

Parliament passed the Preventive Detention Act that gave the PM powers to detain people without trial for up to five years. Many of Nkrumah's political opponents were either silenced by or detained under this law; including erstwhile political comrade turned opponent, Dr. Joseph B. Danquah, who was detained and sadly died in Nsawan prison several years later, in February 1965. Several others, including Kofi Abrefa Busia, fled the country only to return to lead the country very briefly after Nkrumah's death.



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### 1960

Three years after Ghana gained independence, it became a Republic and Nkrumah as first President. In 1961, he declared himself President for Life and the Convention People's Party, CPP, became the sole political party allowed to operate in Ghana. By 1964, other arms of government, including the judiciary and police were purged of anyone suspected to be disloyal to Nkrumah and the ruling party, CCP; including using a referendum to obtain constitutional powers to dismiss any judge. The following year, in 1965, Nkrumah and his party used their majority in the

Parliament to pass an Act that there would only be one candidate for president in any election, and naturally, that one candidate would be none other than himself. It was no wonder that the usual pomp and pageantry that ushered Ghana into independence and make it a bastion of self-rule in Africa virtually lost its shine by the time elections were held in 1965.

The paradox, for me, was that Nkrumah's victory- perhaps deserved- was secured by political chicanery and legal manipulations; the absence of any formidable opposition to his rule. Of course, 1965 was the same year of the biggest and most important international event to be hosted by Nkrumah and the people of Ghana; the Summit of the Heads of States and Governments of the OAU. Amid concerns that Nkrumah had turned the very ideal of African unity on the head, the summit turned out to be a total failure as nearly half of the invited leaders of freed African countries declined.

### 1966

In February 1966, less than six months after his re-election as president, the military overthrew the CPP government while Nkrumah was on state visit to Beijing, China, and on his way to Hanoi,



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North Vietnam, on what he called a peace mission to mediate a peaceful end to the Vietnam war.

### **The Final Days of Kwame Nkrumah**

By the time Kwame Nkrumah lay dying in his hospital bed in Romania in 1972, he was a broken and lonely man; long forgotten by most of Africa and the world at large. His ouster from power by the military six years earlier had attracted only muted protests from a few African capitals, most of them half-hearted in their nature and content. So complete was his abandonment by former political partners, erstwhile admirers and even friends that there seems to be no record of a single African Head of State who paid him a visit during his long stay in hospital. When news of his passing finally broke, a collective sigh of relief swept through African capitals and elsewhere in the world. There was no public mourning for the man who not so long before was celebrated as

a towering hero of the fight against colonialism and imperialism and a fierce campaigner for the unification of all independent African states under one government.

By the time of his death, on April 27, the man once referred to as the Redeemer, the Messiah, the future 'president' of a United Africa had been reduced to an inconvenient that nobody wanted or really missed. Even his final wish for his body to be embalmed and preserved (like that of Lenin) or failing that, to be cremated and his ashes strewn in rivers, streams, deserts and savannas across the African continent, could not be granted. Upon his death, his body was flown back to Ghana where he was quietly buried in his village of birth.

I am afraid to say, for the umpteenth time and with utmost respect for Kwame Nkrumah himself, the most profound empathy for members of his family, close relatives and friends, and for the peoples of Ghana and Africa, that it is about time we put an end to our obsession with Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah; or indeed those leaders whom we trusted with our collective patrimony and





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lives but turned around to trample upon our liberty, rights, welfare and development. In my opinion, some of those larger-than-life imageries of Nkrumah as a hero, state builder and pan-Africanist *par excellence* needed to be revisited, and retold in the light of some of the discomfiting facts that have long been in the public domain. My take is that on the balance, several of his actions in the service of his country, in particular, and the continent, as a whole, dealt pan Africanism a heavy blow. By omission or commission, Nkrumah was not alone in causing this damage to the cause of Pan Africanism. Many who knew Nkrumah personally, including Tanzania's founding President, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, acknowledged that he was very serious about African unity. But, then, also several of his contemporaries; leaders of modern Africa during the first decade of independence loathed and resented the constant advice from Accra.

Then, or even now, no leader wanted to have anything to do with the idea of surrendering their hard-won sovereignty to a greater union (of Africa). Precisely as the new states consolidated their own positions, and as the idea of a pan-African "union government" became less and less a practicable proposition, Nkrumah's fixation with the same cause grew. Mwalimu Nyerere was quoted saying more than a quarter century after Nkrumah's death that he (Nkrumah) sincerely resented Africa's weakness and sought to prevent its "Latin-Americanization." But, then, his methods, his ambition, and the ill-defined nature of his goals doomed the obsession. The "Union Government" became a forlorn hope in Africa, then and now. With that Ghana's own diplomatic stature eroded until when in 1963, the country was even denied a position of eminence in the new Organization of African Unity, OAU. Nkrumah's economic management methods were equally unimpressive.

By 1965, eight years after it became independent, Africa's richest colony at the time of independence had less than USD 500 million in its reserves and was already teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Corruption in government was rife and some claim it went as high up. Social discontent was widespread, even in Nkrumah's strongest constituencies. When the military putsch came in 1966, one of the very first in a long sequence of coups, few were surprised.



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Some writers have suggested that the career of Kwame Nkrumah must therefore be seen in the context of the Africa of his time, which sought a dynamic leader but neither made provision for effective checks and balances nor put in place the structures that would make possible the common goal of continental unity. They go on to say that Ghana's- and, by extension, Africa's- very inadequacies initially made them insensitive to Nkrumah's failings, conspicuous among which was the ever-widening gap between his rhetoric, which called for a socialist revolution, and his practice, which aligned itself to the worst aspects of tribal and capitalist traditions.

You must be wondering why I have not mentioned as emphatically, the many good deeds of the Nkrumah rule, such as the visionary infrastructure projects including the Volta Hydroelectric dam, the highways, the industrialisation drive, the massive school enrolments, the vocal and material support for African liberation; including the decision to rescue Sekou Toure government from the livid French following Guinea's decision during the 1959 Referendum to stay out of the French Union, etc. Well, I am mentioning them now albeit as a mere anecdote. Except, perhaps, for his unprecedented support for Toure's Guinea, such are not acts of heroism but rather what we should expect of any African leader worthy of the position. I am conscious of the risk I am taking urging us to take another flipside view of one of the most admired person in Africa, if not the world. This, after all, is the same Nkrumah who was voted Africa's Man of the Millennium by BBC World Service listeners in the year 2000, described no less as a "Hero of Independence" and an "international symbol of freedom as the leader of the first black African country to shake off the chains of colonial rule".

All this may be true, but I believe it is high time we raised the bar for measuring heroism in Africa. It is high time we started taking ourselves more seriously, demanding more of ourselves as a people and even more of our leaders. It is high time we let our leaders and the world know that for them to qualify as our heroes, their record must stand the test of time, the scrutiny of emotionally disengaged historians and yes, the moral judgement of itinerant ideas men like me who, 50 years from now will be standing before a distinguished audience such as this, ripping



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apart the legacies of some of our present day leaders.

If there is one enduring lesson we can learn from the Nkrumah years, let it flow from a serious reflection on the true value of his legacies as an African hero; not one determined by knee-jerk standing ovation for mediocre performance. By following the latter path, we ourselves contribute both to the erasure of genuine cases of authentic African heroism but also lower the bar by which we should measure the performance of the present or future crop of African leaders. After all, Africa has no shortage of real heroes; and Ghana has contributed more than its fair share of equally deserving heroic African leaders, statesmen and Pan Africanists from Osei Tutu to Opoku Ware. These towering figures spared no effort in building an all-inclusive environment where the will and rights of the people were upheld, respected and defended.

The leadership lesson I am drawing from the story of Osei Tutu's and his successors' masterful consolidation of a strong confederation comprising numerous culturally diverse minor states that were allowed to exercise internal self rule, living by their own customs under their own local chiefs; the creation of an effective state council to which the confederate states were represented and each chief guarded his prerogative jealously against encroachment by the central authority came about because they had learned from the mistakes of the empire's earlier conquests of the Akan tribes that sought to forcefully subjugate and assimilate defeated states. This exemplary magnanimity in the exercise of political, economic and military power by the pre-colonial leaders of Ghana is what enabled their state to grow easily and remain strong and peaceful for a long time.

This lesson was totally lost on Nkrumah when he quickly rose to become leader of independent Ghana and Provisional President of a fabled United African State as some of his Pan Africanist admirers proclaimed. Not surprisingly, it led to disastrous consequences for him personally, for the people of Ghana and it dealt a deadly blow to the flickering flame of the Pan Africanism cause. Now, the inconvenient truth that we are facing today, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, is that Pan Africanism may be alive but certainly not well enough; not the least in view of the ugly events in South Africa this week.



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The blame for the destruction of this noble aspiration lies squarely at the feet of our leaders, Nkrumah being one out of several others who played a key early role in the unraveling of that dream. When Nkrumah made his final speech at the OAU summit in Accra in 1965 calling for all independent African states to unite under one government, the continent had, in all, 33 member-states. In October this year (2015), we will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Accra Summit of the OAU not with one unified African government but 54 fiercely independent ones sworn to maintaining the status quo, for the most part, including respect for the sanctity of controversial borders inherited from former colonial masters.

We will celebrate this anniversary with an African Union establishment in Addis Ababa that is still struggling with raising money to finance its activities, including such pressing ones like peacekeeping, managing refugees, and mobilising quick and adequate responses to emergencies such as the outbreak of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). All of these shortcomings are occurring amid telltale stories of impressive economic growth buoyed by the discovery of vast amounts of mineral wealth across the continent. Very likely, even, we will mark this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary with the usual long speeches made in the ballrooms and plenary hall of a building that was donated to us by our Chinese friends, even though Nkrumah had imagined a proud, powerful, united and prosperous Africa that would not be dependent on handouts from outside.

On the converse, this anniversary will be marked quietly by more than one billion Africans who continue to face extreme difficulty while crossing the borders of other African countries, at a time when Africa has responded to the globalisation call by declaring itself open for business; open to all, but not fellow Africans. We will mark this historic moment against the backdrop of attacks on black immigrants by black Africans in South Africa that are going on as I speak. We will still have fresh memories of the mass deportations of Rwandan refugees by the Tanzania government in 2014 just as we will pretend not to be haunted by the planned deportation of Somali refugees by the Kenya government bent on spending hard-earned money to build high walls ostensibly to



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deter migrants. Finally, we are approaching this anniversary as a continent that is unwilling to expand trade among its members, so much so that the regional trade bodies we have established over the years, SADC, COMESA, EAC, EMOUA, ECOWAS cannot function without support from benefactors in distant places. We call it "aid for trade" and take it happily from our development partners. Five decades after Accra, we have so little to show for the African unification project; nor even a symbolic continental visa free regime! So much for African compassion and brotherhood; so much for Pan Africanism

### Conclusions

Let me conclude by saying this. Kwame Nkrumah, with all his imperfections, played his part. His place in history has been secured for better or worse. But we must also not forget Mwalimu Nyerere's warning in his speech on the event marking 40 years of Ghana's independence in 1997, when he said that "Africa without unity has no future in this world". History has taught us that Nkrumah's one government for all of Africa may not be a realistic goal in today's world order. However, it is our duty to craft a form of a union that works for Africa in the current global setup. It is not too late and we cannot afford to fail.

And when it comes to picking our heroes, let us be careful to give honour to whom it is due; only those who made a meaningful and lasting contribution to our lives and to our quest to reclaim a dignified place amongst the rest of humanity. For me, Osei Tutu and Opoku Ware rank amongst the best leaders Africa has produced in the past 2000 years. They were masterful empire builders, wise leaders who cared for their people. The kingdoms they built lasted hundreds of years. They were Ghanaians; they were Africans.

Today's African leaders can learn a lot from them, their leadership qualities and experience. Current and future generations of Africans can draw inspiration from their accomplishments.



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That, Ladies and Gentlemen, should be the standard for African heroism going forward. And when history is properly written, the record will show that Kwame Nkrumah's legacy of pan Africanism is punctuated by grey, contested narratives.