LEADERSHIP: THE KENYAN CHALLENGE FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Opening Remarks to the 2nd Annual Conference of the Kenyan Community Abroad (KCA)

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Hon Members of Parliament, invited guests, KCA members, ladies and gentlemen.

It is my pleasure and privilege to welcome you all to our second Annual KCA Conference; let history record this great moment as we stand at the start of a brand new century! On behalf of the KCA membership, I thank you most sincerely for being here today; your presence will assure that this conference will succeed.

I have no doubt that this event will be fulfilling to us all as we debate issues, share ideas and network with fellow Kenyans and Kenyanists. The presence of each one of us here will enrich conference deliberations and help widen our scope of knowledge, extend our understanding and widen our circle of friendships. At the end of it all, I am sure, we shall be much more enriched with our interactions and through the knowledge we would have shared.

We acknowledge the work of a number of people that have been instrumental to making this conference happen, many of who are neither chosen nor elected. It is largely through their volunteer efforts that much of the work we see today came to fruition.

WHY WE ARE HERE

The Annual KCA Conference was conceived as a meeting place where, as Kenyans and Kenyanists, we share and discuss ideas; to raise pertinent issues that affect us and our country Kenya; to network and lay down strategies for assuring a better future for ourselves and our country. Ideas, strategies, resolutions and plans discussed at these conferences are intended to enrich us, individually and collectively and help shape our common destiny.

We must make the most of this forum; at the end of it, the resolutions we make should be a blueprint for a common future. Let's make this a historic moment. Let's lay down the vision of the new century.

And let's make this an event like no other. We must go beyond slogans, for anyone can chant them. For instance, any person can shout, "Moi Must Go", as indeed he should. However, few have the capacity to tell us how to get rid of the system that created Moi. Let's take a long-range view and focus on a Kenya devoid of the present corrupt system that has occasioned untold suffering to our people! This system that continues to shame us internationally MUST never thrive. And that requires concrete measures of meticulous thought, planning and persistent campaign.

And never doubt that we can successfully face this challenge for as we say in Gusii: Kanyama gake gakora bokima kee. In the words of one writer: never doubt that a small group of men and women,
committed to a cause, can move mountains! For those like Minister William Ruto, who continue to deny KCA's existence and role, I say the train of change has long left the station! And nothing can stop the idea whose time has come!

Change is happening! And change MUST come!

TODAY'S REALITY

We stand at a crossroads in world history, not because we are at the beginning of the century, but that more than in any period in recorded history, the world enjoys an unprecedented amount of wealth. At the same time, we witness worse suffering than ever before.

Technology continues to fuel a world wide economic boom and life expectancy for many people continues to improve; for many societies, illiteracy, ignorance, poverty and malnutrition are things of the past.

Today, we see deep levels of deprivation as never seen before in many parts of the world; starvation continues to ravage many lives, especially on our continent, including our country, Kenya. (Recent figures suggest 50% of Kenyans live in poverty.) Many continue to die in senseless wars perpetrated by selfish interests and pursuit of self-enrichment. Warlords seem happier spending on armaments than feeding their people!

It is a contradiction that so much suffering continues to happen as much of the world swims in wondrous plenty! Our failure to tap into and exploit this flow of wealth and extraordinary progress of humankind condemns our people to undue suffering, increased misery, hopelessness, crime and, eventually, early death.

It is a wonder of the human spirit that, despite existing debilitating and dehumanising conditions in many of our countries, our people remain humane.

We can blame the skewed international economic and geopolitical order. We can claim that we are a relatively young country. In fact, we can with very good reasons, blame neo-colonialism for our problems. We can, with a degree of justification, demand reparations for the West's slave trafficking from Africa and colonial plunder on the continent. And we can do more. We can blame the World Bank and the IMF for imposing unworkable conditions on us! As well, we can trot the globe begging for aid. In the end, none of these options are sustainable.

Remember that the world owes no one country a living! As a people and country, our responsibilities must be the betterment of our people. To do so, we must play the right politics, implement sound economic policies and learn from our past experiences and experiences of others; and if we fail to do so, we will forever condemn our people to perpetual suffering. This MUST never happen for WE MUST SUCCEED.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

"Kenya in the 21st Century" is our conference theme. This conference will be a great success if, at the end of it, we would have identified the greatest challenge that we are likely to face in the new century.
I suggest that, that challenge is the cultivation of proper, patriotic and committed political leadership; we want a leadership that will emancipate our people from the yoke of current suffering; we want a leadership that will liberate us from ignorance, poverty, disease, greed, tribalism, and corruption. The leadership must help us become free so each individual can be self-actualised. In so doing, such leadership would have humanised us a little more. It would give our people the possibility of attaining their human potential.

As men and women who can see, hear, speak and reason, our sin will be our failure to recognise and hearken to this call of duty; for are we not our society’s elite? We must point the way! It is our duty. And that will be showing leadership.

The leadership for the next century must have a vision and plan for the survival of our people, so that each time they walk our land, they have hope. Each time they wake in the morning to go about their work, they have anticipation. Each time they encounter challenges, they have the confidence to face them. Each time they retire from their daily chores, they feel a sense of accomplishment and fulfilment! And in whatever our people do daily, weekly, monthly and all-year round, they would have a sense of belonging!

All this cannot happen without leadership. If the question were put to name the problem and challenge we face in the future, the answer, in typical Clintonisque, would be: it is leadership, stupid!

**LEADERSHIP: WHAT IT IS**

My definition of "leadership" differs, considerably, from the traditional use the term. *(I hope that this does not disappoint those among us that hold elected office.)* Too often, we call people leaders when they do not merit the description. For instance, the fact that someone wins an election doesn't make that person a leader! In any case, the fact that someone wins an election doesn't make that person a leader! In any case, elections get rigged!

As well, a person who takes over government by force of arms is not necessarily a leader! S/he may head the coup effort but fail to provide leadership.

In my books (and I have borrowed largely from Warren Bennis' *On Becoming a Leader*):

- Leadership provides a compelling vision and aspiration, and points the way to the future. It communicates that vision and works to transform the vision into reality. *(In Kenya, this vision must incorporate one Kenya of diverse people and culture; it must celebrate our variety and appreciate the strength of our diversity; the vision must see Kenya as pluralistic and allows free enterprise to thrive; Kenya must be a land law and order; it must help cultivate compassion and a caring people. The vision must include cultivating a work ethic.)*

- Leadership inspires and motivates. It is optimistic. It has faith and offers hope for a better future. Leadership must believe in its ability to achieve and trust in its followers' capacity to succeed. *(I get amused at how quickly we dismiss indigenous Kenyans when in competition with foreigners! Leadership must change this culture of lack of confidence in our own.)*

- Eric Hoffer in the *Ordeal of Change* says that there can be no real freedom without the freedom to fail. Leaders must embrace error, for to err is human! They must admit mistakes but not be captive to fear of failure;
Leadership challenges tradition, especially where tradition has become irrelevant and doesn't work any more; True leadership understands history, knows well the prevailing culture and is prepared to change that culture for the betterment of society. (For example, too often we are trapped in our deep-rooted allegiance to narrow ethnic interests, something the leadership must address in no uncertain terms.)

True leadership welcome dissent and debate, rather than pretending to know it all. Leadership works through persuasion and reason, rather than coercion. It collaborates and builds coalitions; it is humble and has integrity. Ladies and gentlemen, true leadership is dependable! True leadership not only talks the talk, but also walks the walk! (For instance, it is one thing for President Moi to talk against corruption when his name is closely linked with the greatest corruption scandal in our history! Goldenberg exposes the hypocrisy of many of those in power.) As John Locke said: "the actions of men are the best interpreters of their thoughts".

Finally, true leadership is patient and focuses on the long view. (Oginga Odinga, God bless him, may see Moi as long-necked like a giraffe; unfortunately, Kenyans haven’t benefited from that in terms long-range vision.) True leaders know when they have exhausted their potential and the time to hand over the baton of governing. I call this the Mandela Magic. (If only our own president were such statesman-like, he would have realized that he has overstayed his welcome! Ama sivyo wanzangu?)

FACTS FROM HISTORY

The joy of independence 37 years ago gave our people a sense of hope; it brought a feeling of emancipation from the yoke of colonialism. Independence was meant to bring us joy and freedom.

In 1963 our people embarked on a journey of self-actualisation, believing in the goodness of freedom fighters, men (hardly any women) who assumed national leadership. They were fellow Africans after all! This journey was meant to take us out bondage of discrimination, restore our pride, free us from poverty, ignorance, illiteracy and all manners of ills from the colonial era. Freedom should have brought us dignity!

At independence, our people placed trust in our freedom fighter that then became fathers of independence to lead us to Canaan. To the dismay of many a Kenyan, these political leaders retained the colonial powers intact. They used power to detain, without trial, and persecute many innocent people, including fellow freedom fighters; they instituted torture of those with different opinions. Many were assassinated (Pio Gama Pinto, Mboya, JM and others) contributing to a sad chapter in our history.

As if that were not enough, independence leaders saw corruption grow under their watch. This cancer has become institutionalised to a degree that it is second nature, where the word corruption and Kenyan are near synonymous. Our own people laugh at those who do not use public office for personal enrichment. Transparency International, an organisation that tracks world wide corruption, rates Kenya among the most corrupt countries in the world.

Our development record hasn't been stellar either! Look at our roads, our schools, hospitals, towns, water system, and all! None of us can be proud of what we see today!
Our behaviour has made us targets of butt jokes. Recently, and in reference to current power rationing in the country, someone writing in one South African paper remarked that "God had decreed that there be light all over the world, except in Kenya"! At the beginning of the new millennium, we seem to have regressed into the pre-industrial age.

Among symbols of our national decay is the high accident rate on Kenyan roads, which stands among the highest in the world. Crimes, like robbery with violence, are commonplace. Murder is on the rise as is the use of drugs. Life expectancy is going down and we continue to lose many able-bodied people to treatable diseases such malaria and typhoid; and AIDS continues its march in the face of a crumbling health infrastructure. Meanwhile, our doctors make a beeline to foreign lands because we neither seem to value their services nor care for their welfare. (Reports in the Kenyan Press recently suggest that more than 500 Kenyan doctors work in Southern Africa alone.)

Ladies and Gentlemen: no country developed by exporting high-quality manpower like we are doing presently.

In close to four decades of Uhuru, we have experienced ethnic cleansing; we continue to witness stealing from government and private institutions. In short, we continue to witness our morals sink deep, even as we claim to be a God-fearing people.

The greatest resource of any nation is its people. Yet the investment we make in this great resource has declined to unacceptable levels. School enrolment is at its lowest since independence and even those that complete schools have little to look forward to as there exist little in planning for job creation.

A few weeks ago, the President once again appeal for international famine relief support claiming he is no rainmaker! Many Kenyans face potential starvation. The same story happened only a while ago when a famine devastated Turkana, Ukambani and other areas of the country. That tragedy condemned a number of Kenyans to premature death, family agony and suffering. (We must commend the Nation Group of Newspapers for taking the lead in raising money to alleviate the pain of many. In that scheme, KCA made small contribution to the effort and we are glad that the effort was recognised for the alleviation of suffering it offered to our fellow Kenyan people.)

Famine relief and international appeals for food aid, in my view, are \textit{ad hoc} measures for short-term alleviation of suffering. Unfortunately, our condition is worse than \textit{ad hoc} measures can afford. And much as these efforts are useful, they are of Band-Aid nature! One cannot close an oozing wound with a Band-Aid. What we need are permanent solutions based on proactive planning and long range view in food security based on strategic reserves. It is the only way we can avoid the yearly recurrence of begging rounds.

Meanwhile, we continue to play the zero-sum game in politics. Differences of opinion are taken to the extreme and treated as enmity. Yet no country can advance without rational debate of ideas and opinions. (Consider this problem from Game Theory. Two soldiers guarding a station under attack know that together they can forestall the fall of their city. Alone, one cannot beat the attack. However, for selfish reasons, one can take off, be safe, lose his/her buddy and the city altogether. Too often we fail to appreciate how much synergy can sustain us.)

Let the truth be told. All these ills are due to failure of leadership! The right leadership would be dedicated to serving the people rather than enriching itself. Proper leadership would worry
about consequences of their actions before making pronouncements. True leadership would be at the forefront of attacking known ills with a vengeance. It would be proactive in planning using the immense resources of educated Kenyans.

There is more. Lack of leadership has allowed foreigners to continually poke fingers into our internal affairs. We are like the neighbour with little self-respect and even less community-respect who becomes everyone’s business. Is it any wonder that now the IMF, World Bank and other donors govern our country by proxy. We can call it the Dream Team, or whatever high-sounding name it warrants. That will not take from the fact that it is pursuing an agenda hatched in Washington and London. (Lest I be misunderstood on this, let me explain myself. The Dream Team may achieve the objectives of streamlining public administration. However, that we came to a stage where it takes foreigners to convince the political establishment of the need for necessary reforms in the civil service underlines our failure of trust in our own.)

Lack of leadership has never been underscored more profoundly than in the case of the debate on constitutional reforms. What we see is a focus on narrow selfish interests which, in turn, clouds the needs for the country. Failure to accept a process of consensus underlines our moral poverty and lack of appreciation for democratic ideals.

There is more. We can argue all day about the need for a new constitutional dispensation but when the chips are down, it will require leadership to hold the letter and spirit of the document. It is leadership that will point us in the direction of moral values and national interest to assure the culture of constitutionalism.

LESSONS FROM HISTORY

Ladies and Gentlemen: not all hope is lost. Our country is not just gloom and doom. In the 37 years of independence we have seen a substantial amount of good happen in our country.

For one, we continue to be Kenya, one country, and maintain a sense of Kenyanness. Our organisation, KCA is a good example of such manifestation of Kenyanness. Investment in education in the early years of independence made Kenya one of the most literate societies on the African continent. In many parts of the world, we are seen as a land of beautiful people and of hard working men and women; we are a home of tireless farmers, peasants, students, teachers and workers. Ladies and gentlemen, despite election shortcomings, we have kept a regular election timetable and laid the foundations of democratic society.

A common saying goes that those who do not learn from history are destined to repeat it. The 37-year journey is not in vain! Another writer (Teresa Stratas) said that the true richness of a journey comes with embracing its experiences fully - the good, the bad and the ugly. History is one of the many teachers we can learn from. However, true lessons come from our fears, our tragedies, our failures and our triumphs, for as the saying goes, experience is the best teacher!

There has been suffering along the journey. There have also been triumphs. Let the 37 years not be in vain. And always remember that the glass is half-full rather than half empty!
SOME EXAMPLES FROM OUR HISTORY

♦ We have the capacity to do better. Look at the Kenya of the 60s and 70s, a period of unprecedented economic growth, rise in standard of living, increased life expectancy, and rise inliteracy. In this period, we had a working, well-maintained infrastructure; the health care system worked and school enrolment was an all time high. And despite the harsh weather of droughts, we never once went around the globe begging. True, we have more people to cater for now. However, we also have better-educated Kenyans with better knowledge than in yesteryears.

♦ Corruption impacts on all of us. Tell me who Kenyan is immune from this disease? If corruption is responsible for our poor roads and hospitals, which person is not at risk of road accidents or potentially a victim of lack of medicine in hospitals?

♦ Oppression neither pays nor is it sustainable. Sooner than later, a people will arise to assert their rights to freedoms whether those in power like it or not. The chaos of 1995 through 1997 should be lessons in how not to stifle God-given rights.

♦ No one person has answers to all our problems. Ours is a diverse country of active minds and bodies. These thinking people have ideas and thoughts on how to make our country better and improve lives of our people. The results of one person's wisdom at play can be seen in the wasteland that our country has become. Evidence is everywhere for all of us to see in the graveyard of Nyayo Tea Zones, Nyayo Buses, Nyayo Car, Nyayo wards, etc., leave alone the 8-4-4 system. Never again will one person and his cabal of supporters lead so many a citizen astray.

♦ Beware of that trap you lay out for your perceived enemy lest the same snare you. Those who advocated for detention soon after independence were among its first casualties. Let's build trust, respect and compassion for fellow citizens.

♦ Assassinations do not pay. Sooner than later, someone emerges to fill the gap left by the departed. And as long as Kenyan mothers continue to give birth, there will always be someone to replace the assassinated. Save us the pain and agony and find ways to work together as people of one nation. In any case the law will always catch up. For example, ghosts of JM, Pio Gama Pinto and Ouko, among others, refuse to go away until justice is done and their souls rested in peace.

♦ Equality in the face of the law MUST be the basis for governance. Preferential treatment soon catches up with us. If we hope to be governed constitutionally, then we must work for the rule of law.

These lessons will not come easily; it requires courage to honestly accept past reality; it need commitment in form of energy, time and thought to make the lessons happen. It is not clear that many of us appreciate these lessons. Once again, that calls for leadership.

Only then would we have, in the words of Chinua Achebe, found where the rain started to beat us.
FUTURE DIRECTION

God was kind to Kenya and has always been; he gave us beautiful land of rolling hills and valleys; he gave us fertile soils with which to feed our population. God gave us animals and forest plants as our natural heritage. Being the kind person He is, God also gave us beautiful people; God-fearing men and women of hard work and trust.

We need leadership to harness the potential of our country’s resources, be it material or human. Leadership must help us discern this potential; it must help us weave the potential into a collective vision. It must help us attain the vision of nationhood and a county strong in our diversity.

In any country, the people form the greatest resource there can ever be; it is people that can collectively achieve success, form a nation and help realise common good. As a country, we have invested very heavily in the development of our manpower. In the sixties, there was free primary education, and subsidised high school and university study. Results can be seen in the number of doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc. in the country. Kenyans are not people who shy from education and they have shown that, given the opportunity, they can excel. From North America to Europe; from East Asia to South Africa, Kenyans have demonstrated their capabilities in the social sciences to physical sciences; from teaching to research. Kenyans continue to excel as our KCA membership can attest.

Once again, it is leadership that will appreciate the value of what we have and reach out to tap into this potential.

All of us know how hard our people work; just go anywhere in the world and find a Kenyan and see the effort and impact they generate in the communities live in. Kenyans are among the most literate people on the African continent; our economy happens to be one of the most advanced, even among the so-called developing countries (I prefer the term less industrialised countries!). Kenyan institutions such as the Universities, the Police Force, the Armed Forces, the Legal system, etc used to be world class! We had an efficient system of roads, telephones used to work. Banks did function and were near our people.

God created each of us as unique individuals; each of us is distinct from all others; and this is both in mind and body; we do things differently; we think and work differently; we perceive knowledge differently. Most challenges we face in leadership today pertain to failure to forge a common understanding of our collective interests. The way forward is to realise that given our individual uniqueness, we have an idea, a perspective, etc to contribute for the common good and the betterment of our country!

It is leadership that will help us tap into this human potential.

A forest has many trees, little trees and large trees. It has plant life and animal life. A forest is a home of many a species of life. It is the source of lumber and game meat, and home of medicinal plants. A forest improves rainfall in an area and sustains other forms of live outside the forest. In short, a forest is many things to many animals, plants and human beings.
Unfortunately, one cannot appreciate the forest in its entirety by walking among the trees. To see the forest properly and comprehend its power and sense of awe, one must rise above the trees to see the beauty that is its canopy and its formation.

In many ways, a forest is like people in a country. Too often we take fellow citizens for granted for we view them individually. Too often we fail to rise above the forest and see the beauty of our formation, our relationships and our potential.

Let's rise above the forest and appreciate our richness of tradition, our variety of foods, our music and dance, our diverse views and all. Let's all seek collective synergy for together we stand, divided we fall.

*It is good leadership that will help us discern the forest from the trees; leadership will enable us appreciate the beauty, potential and capacity of us all in the "forest" that is Kenya.*

Ladies and Gentlemen: the future belongs to us and we are here to shape it! There are no options to success for succeeding we MUST and we must plant the seeds of that success. And as we move forward, bagging one victory after another, we must not forget the words of the great historian Toynbee that from triumph to conflict. In today's words, we must move from victory to planning for future victories.

*Triumph can only come with leadership and a vision; long term sustenance can only happen with focus, trust and confidence.*

In 1963 we attained victory over the colonial powers. We trusted our own kind to act in our interests; lessons from history suggest a permanent vigilance for, as Desmond Tutu has said once: *the capacity for human evil is amazing! In the same way, the capacity to do good is immense!*

Ladies and Gentlemen: the journey ahead is hard; but we can win, for there is no option to victory. And we must point the way! That vision for the next century must happen here!

God Bless you all!

And Long Live Kenya!!