

25 Years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall

SOME PERSONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR AFRICA

A team of 18 young leaders from Uganda, on the invitation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, visited the German capital, Berlin. In its totality the programme was a highly inspiring itinerary of intellectual exchange. The visit to the Berlin Wall Memorial was, however, the indisputable highlight. This was more than one year ago. Beyond summarising the story of liberal democracy's triumph over structural state control, it thronged me towards drawing parallels and debating implications. At the 25th anniversary of the fall of the wall, I still find myself with the debates I had then: what parallels exist between the then divided Germany and present day Uganda or Africa? What have been the implications of the fall of the wall to the so-called developing world? Are there any specific lessons around the fall of the wall that Uganda or Africa can draw on?

Parallels: The Invisible Walls in Africa

Everyone in visible range could see the Berlin wall. It was a physical structure whose bits and pieces exist to date. The story of armed men on guard to stop any Easterner from crossing is a tearing one. At the memorial, a flicker of photographs illuminates the experiences of women and men, young and old, who died in frantic efforts to escape. But what the wall truly represented is the major focus of this reflection. The Berlin Wall stood for a demarcation between two sets of institutions: in the west was an egalitarian system set along liberal democracy and individual property rights. In the east

was a structural system of state control with no individual property rights or choice. One can say that both institutions were well developed at least in terms of their ability to enforce the rules of the game. Empirically, however, it can be unreservedly stated that West Germany was freer and offered more opportunities to persons, which is why the east had to employ a gigantic wall and considerable force to stop its people from what was then called defecting.

In the context of Africa, the institutional differences between West and East Germany can be seen at two levels: the first is between Africa and the rest of the world, while the second exists within individual African nations. In a global context, African states – despite 50 years of self-rule – have comparatively failed to transit into institutional democracies as well as to construct systems that guarantee equal economic rights. Many African governments still run under extractive and coercive institutions akin to the communist East Germany. This can be stated for a fact without attempting to delve into the causalities – as debating the causes of bad governance in Africa can be an extremely extensive debate to fit this rather precise piece. The obvious consequences can however be stressed: development in Africa is blocked! The service delivery system in many parts is observed to be a complete failure while the continent still harbours some of the worst suffocations of human rights in the 21st century. Bad governance has locked the opportunities of a continent with the world's greatest endowment of natural resources. Consequently, a countless number of African young men and women will still have to drown in the Medi-

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terranean trying to escape to Europe in search for better opportunities. The sea has become the “death trap” similar to the stretch between either sides of the Berlin Wall. But why would someone risk their life simply to get away from home? And those that make it through the horrendous journey will always find walls: a closed border with armed men and women on guard. The only difference from the Berlin Wall being: this time they are not stopped in escaping “from” but will be prohibited from entering into Europe. The wall certainly exists.

At the level on individual states, not all Africans have equal political and economic rights in their own countries. There are several countries where any form of dissent is de facto a crime. In many countries single regimes have held on to power for decades. Revolutions in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and recently Burkina Faso that have attempted to break the ‘undemocratic walls’ have ended up benefiting military cronies. The guards may fall but the walls remain – perhaps because they are invisible, they are not physical walls like the Berlin Wall. In terms of economics, beyond the fact that business and investment rights have been effectively captured by the ruling elites, there are also serious structural problems. An example in this regard is the fact that in spite of insurmountable evidence in support of gender equality, African states have failed to reform the institutional framework to grant women access to the factors of production, particularly land – and consequently business finance. Girls and women still get lesser opportunities as compared to boys and men. Domestic violence remains a reality for most African women. Those who dare to run away from such ‘walls’ end up trafficked to all sorts of places and at times into modern day slavery. They were otherwise trying to escape institutions that make them second-hand citizens in their own countries, structures that present them with neither endowments nor entitlements. They were only seeking to break the ‘wall’, the barriers to the full realisation of their capabilities.

What implications back home?

Twenty five years ago when the Berlin Wall came down, the current Ugandan president had been in power for barely three years. He had - only recently, in 1986 – shot his way to power following a five-year guerrilla war. Before the fall of the wall, he and his contemporaries in the so-called developing world would be guaranteed momentous aid financing without significant conditions (if any). The western donors then only negotiated for one guarantee: that the Ugandan president was not going to take sides with communism.

Experts have argued that with the fall of the wall (in essence the triumph of western capitalism), communism as a threat ceased to be. The donors would then come up with conditionalities – among them the not so popular Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). Conditional development assistance has its own mess but also several indispensable evidence-backed arguments in its support. Conditionality and aid in general remains the subject of an ever mutating debate. However, with the triumph of capitalism and the surge of conditional aid a major development had occurred: African leaders would know for sure that donors act out of self-interest. The relevance of this lesson comes into context considering that a number of African nations will commemorate the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall under same leaders as they had when the wall came down in 1989. The long serving African heads of government have an incredible experience on the subject of development assistance particularly the notion of self-interest on the side of donors. And while communism has never re-emerged to be a threat to the west, China has risen to effectively assume this position. On the side of Africa, the same leaders in the game 25 years ago when communism was defeated are at it again – playing China against the west to discourage especially questions about democratisation or accountability. China is purportedly not meddling in African domestic affairs, a concept effectively used in the blackmail that accompanies aid negotiations. Given that donors have a self-interest this could explain

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why there seems to be increased caution on debating democratisation within the framework of development assistance. Could a new but 'invisible' wall be slowly nearing completion?

put an end to the Mediterranean being a death trap for promising young Africans.

What lessons for me as an African?

The German Democratic Republic (GDR) had seemingly developed a rather unfeatable coercive capacity to sustain the Berlin Wall. It would not be in anticipation that this wall would fall through a peaceful struggle. The success of what has been termed the "Peaceful German Revolution" can offer considerable encouragement to Africans struggling to bring about reform back home. One important lesson in this regard is that a successful revolution will have to come from within. It was not people of West Germany who brought the wall down, the oppressed people from the east did that.

A general lesson that can be drawn from West Germany is that starting immediately after the Second World War the reconstruction process was anchored on institutions. The incredible success of the Marshall Plan can – with confidence – be explained as being in part a result of the effective role played by Germans in its delivery. First, Germany made sure that the aid money was not being stolen – it got to do the work it was meant for. Second, the tasks were executed by the most qualified people regardless of whom they knew or did not know in government – access to public opportunities and services was impersonal and not something based on personal ties. Several African projects fail because their management is often handed to people not on the basis of competence but rather on grounds of their connection to the governing elite. The same typically applies to public sector investment support schemes such as finance, tax waivers or land leases. A golden opportunity for Africa's best to redeem it is being lost. Impersonality in public service can bring about unimaginable motivation resulting in opportunities that could