

## **After the death of George Floyd – how Africa discusses racism**

### **Views from South Africa, Nigeria and Uganda**

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The death of the African American George Floyd has shocked many observers worldwide, who did not discuss racism as it doesn't affect them personally. Not only in the US, but also in Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium and France did people take to the streets to protest against racism in their respective societies. But how have the events in Minneapolis and subsequent demonstrations in over 50 cities in the United States, where black people protested and put racism on the Agenda, been reflected in Africa, the continent of predominantly black people?

How did society in South Africa – which is still deeply divided along racial and economic lines – deal with events that brought back memories of the Apartheid past? How did intellectuals in Nigeria, the most populous African country react? And what would Ugandans say, whose country was once described by the then journalist Winston Churchill as the Pearl of Africa and whose long-time president Yoweri Museveni is an admirer of the man whom many people hold responsible for furthering racism in the US - President Donald Trump.

We have asked for three contributions from South Africa, West- and East Africa. The outcome is as checkered and diverse as the continent with its 54 countries. In the case of South Africa, an apolitical society is still avoiding some painful insights into their its racism issues. Whereas in Nigeria and Uganda the events in Minneapolis triggered less a debate about color and discrimination, but about the general mistreatment by the security forces.

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## **South Africa's Response – or Non-Response**

The police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 by white officers, in the United States of America, shone spotlight on racism anew. That anger – which also manifested on social media – manifested in widespread protests in the US and across the globe as scores of ordinary people from Australia to European capitals such as Brussels took to the streets. Though less noticeable by news crews, this episode has rekindled public discussions about racial discrimination.

The similarities between the US and South Africa, in the way of race relations and racism, are notable.

Though instances similar with Floyd's killing are rare – names like Collins Khosa (the man died as a result of the (black) security forces' brutal actions) come to mind – South Africa remains a divided and racist society. Cases of hate speech abound. Then there is subtle racism which goes unreported, to quote Ferial Haffajee, author of *What If There Were No Whites in South Africa*, just like discrimination in the classroom as *Run Racist Run: Journeys Into the Heart of Racism* author Eusebius McKaiser recalls in a *Mail & Guardian* column where he decries how racists "shift the goalposts".

Given a background of a world united in its rejection of racism, and these examples at home, it is worth exploring South Africa's treatment of, and public response to, discrimination or racially motivated brutality.

"While one country burned over the death of a black man, the other was silent," remarked Democracy Development Programme's Dr Devi Rajab in her column in *Daily Maverick* and *The Mercury*. Such deafening silence speaks volumes about South Africa's treatment of the "race question" as it is often termed here. "The cry that black lives matter seems, in this case, to be unheeded in SA. And this should not be so," Rajab opined, joining a list of voices that use public platforms to speak out against racism (or, on the other side of the spectrum, pretence that it is not such a big issue).

## Very few comments

Such sentiments are rarely aired on public platforms. It seems that there is little to no appetite, or ability, to tackle issues relating to racial injustice in South Africa – a generation since the end of institutionalised discrimination or apartheid.

That would explain why, apart from reporting the events around George Floyd's death as a news item, local radio stations and newspapers hardly paid attention to the issue. Barring a handful of journalists and columnists, not many people – or civil organisations – saw fit, in the wake of Floyd's death, to push for racial justice or reflect on South Africa's race question or lead public discussions thereof.

For University of South Africa's Prof Lesiba Teffo, to ascribe to little appetite to engage is too simplistic. He cites a more suspect reason behind the silence or failure to debate. "We are seeing political expediency and opportunism at play," says Teffo. He argues that those with the means to lead the debate, such as the civil society and political elites, are worried about their "meal ticket" and hence the silence. That might be the case, but surely ordinary people can speak out for themselves?

“The South African population is largely politically illiterate,” Teffo retorts, arguing that political elites – across the party spectrum – have found ways of using voices of ordinary people when it suits them while leaving the uncomfortable or inconvenient truths untouched. “Steve Biko would have labelled the brutality we saw in the Khosa case as self-hate, but it remains a racist act. Black people are on the receiving end of brutality meted out by black and white people some in power others not.”

Given the prevailing trends it is hard to dismiss Prof Teffo’s assertion. As an aside, when South Africans – young and old, black and white – get to discuss racism, emotions tend to run high. This on its own is not surprising, what comes as a surprise though is the reluctance to tackle the topic head on and without being defensive. Is this possible in a divided society? Maybe it is safer that way, as some people argue. On the flipside, it only postpones the day of confronting the problem in order to address it before finally moving on – something that a section of South Africa has consistently called for (without bare consideration to all other factors).

To draw parallels and differences between the US and South Africa, a lawyer who files as Professor Balthazar in *Daily Maverick* opines: “George Floyd means more to [the US] than Collins Khosa means to us.” In this case he was juxtaposing the arguably oblivious manner in how South Africans reacted to the assault of Khosa to that of Floyd.

“So, to return to the fundamental question: do black lives not matter in this country, almost 370 years of colonialist and apartheid rule notwithstanding? It can surely not be an excuse that the security forces are predominantly black so they must get a free pass if they cause the death of someone like Khosa?” the columnist asks.

All is not lost. Youngsters, seemingly unhappy with what they view as an afraid or oblivious cohort – the generation that survived apartheid – are taking the lead in such discussions. For instance, it was through the agitation of young people that South Africa reconsidered public display of colonial symbols, such as the statue of Cecil John Rhodes which was removed from the University of Cape Town as far back as 2015. History repeated itself this month, in global capitals such as London, when protesters called for the removal of colonial and slavery symbols in the wake of Floyd’s death.

Expressing sentiments not dissimilar to Prof Teffo’s, blogger Andile Zulu lamented “a tendency for South Africans to possess an unthinking attachment to certain words”, he wrote in the *Mail & Guardian* citing words such as reconciliation and non-racialism as examples.

“As more black citizens entered spaces previously inaccessible (private and former model C schools, law and accounting firms, suburban neighbourhoods), an unsettling discovery was made,” argues Zulu. “Too many of their white managers, neighbours, classmates, lecturers, colleagues had not abandoned — had not even reflected on — their racist beliefs. How could reconciliation be possible with those who so dearly clutched on to these beliefs?”

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## Nigeria's security forces and the absence of racialism

As the horrifying video of the killing of George Floyd, the 46-year-old black man killed by a white police officer in the U.S. city of Minneapolis, made its way around the world, there was a feeling of déjà vu for the many Nigerians who watched it. This is because Nigerians, more than any other country globally, know what it feels to have life snuffed out of civilians by a brutal police force. Nigerian youths, particularly young men, have found themselves beaten, robbed and even killed by a unit of the Nigerian Police Force, the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). Over the last few years, there has been a concerted campaign called #ENDSARS to get the government to disband or reform this rogue unit.<sup>1</sup>

The Nigerian Police is perhaps unsurprisingly ranked the worst in the world.<sup>2</sup>

But Floyd's killing extends beyond mere police brutality. The numerous deaths of young, predominantly male black Americans at the hands of police highlight the dangers of a racist police system in the United States. That combination of systemic and entrenched racism with police brutality has proven to be a toxic mix. And the gruesome video has sparked protests and difficult conversations about racism and policing in Europe, South Africa and elsewhere.

The reaction in Nigeria has been different. Beyond relatively muted protests at the U.S. Embassy in the capital Abuja and the Consulate in Lagos, there have been barely any conversations about systemic racism in Nigeria.<sup>3</sup> It's easy to see why.

Nigeria is the most populous black nation on earth, with an estimated population of about 200 million people. In terms of racial composition, Nigeria is a monolith. And Nigerians do not have to think of themselves as black while in their own country. The divisions are often run along ethnic, tribal or religious lines. For many Nigerians, the first time they realise or acknowledge their blackness is when they travel outside of the continent. In a way, this affords Nigerians a certain type of privilege that is not available to black people living in majority-white nations.

## Coming back to avoid racism abroad

However, Nigerians are prolific travelers and a number of these people have experienced racism on their travels. For many, racism is one of the reasons they choose to return home after living and working abroad. Stephanie Busari, a CNN Supervising Producer in Lagos, wrote an essay in the wake of Floyd's killing on the conversations she had with her nine-year-old daughter.

Titled “What speaking to my daughter about George Floyd taught me about my race privilege as an African”, Busari’s essay explains why one of the reasons she moved back with her daughter to Lagos from London four years ago was to escape the racism she encountered every day from the time she moved there aged 12.

“I wanted her to grow up in a world without racism and micro-aggressions, and the mental exhaustion that comes with them, just like I did when I was her age,” Busari wrote. She added that she wanted her daughter to grow up “in a world in which she would be fully accepted and simply belong -- without the need to explain where she was from, or to justify her existence.”<sup>4</sup>

In a country where everyone is black, Nigerians simply do not have to worry about their skin colour being one of the things holding them back from succeeding. As such, the Black Lives Matter protests have not kicked off in the country because that is far from their daily realities. It shows in the lack of opinion columns in Nigerian newspapers or on the airwaves.

Instead, the Floyd killing has renewed the conversations about policing in the country and the value of Nigerian lives lost to state violence and terrorists. The Nigerian academic Remi Adekoya recently wrote a column in the *Business Day* newspaper asking “When will Nigerian lives matter?”<sup>5</sup>

Adekoya noted that Nigerian lives are treated with impunity by almost everyone. “Death and violence have no shock value in Nigeria,” he wrote. He continued: “Once you’re not a VIP in Nigeria, you can be manhandled, mistreated and even killed without much fear of consequence. Because only VIP lives matter in Nigeria. The rest of the country is expendable.”

Adekoya’s column perfectly encapsulates the Nigerian mood in this present time. While they recognize the privilege of not having to deal with racial issues, Nigerians are exasperated by how little value is placed on human lives, especially by those in positions of power, and the Floyd killing has brought those questions flooding back again.

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## **Not close enough to home - Ugandans, George Floyd and #BlackLivesMatter**

The cold blood murder of George Floyd, the African American man who was killed by a police officer on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota ignited anti-racism protests under the #BlackLivesMatter movement across the world.

The wave took a different dimension in Uganda. Firstly, there were no demonstrations in Kampala as was the case elsewhere. Secondly, the public debate that ensued over Floyd's murder actively played out on social media and mainstream media but the tone, angle and thematic focus of that debate deserves reflection to the extent that it was problematized as an American issue.

On May 25, 2020, the U.S Mission Uganda tweeted, "We are deeply troubled by the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Authorities have fired the officers involved and are conducting a full investigation. Government officials should not operate with impunity in any country." That tweet generated 155 comments, 138 retweets and 510 likes.

A good number of Ugandans, in response to the tweet expressed ambivalent feelings with some calling out the USA and wondering what moral authority it had to preach to countries like Uganda about human rights.

In two of Uganda's major daily newspapers, *Daily Monitor* and *New Vision*, the Floyd story was reported as any other foreign news story with few columnists devoting their space to discuss the issue. On two of the country's leading television stations, NBS and NTV and prominent radio stations, the discussion on racism was not exactly provoked.

### **No homogenous sentiment**

Instead, Ugandan elite, public intellectuals and opinion leaders did two things: they got an opportunity to mock the USA and point out its holier than thou attitude to



African countries on matters such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law. Secondly, the discourse that ensued took an intellectual path with Ugandans problematizing racism in its context of blacks in the USA while others, especially on social media revived discussions back home on ethno-centrism, tribalism and xenophobia suffered by Ugandans in countries like South Africa. These were dispersed conversations and not representative of any homogenous sentiment.

By and large, these were not impassioned debates but matter of fact observations and social media banter. The Uganda government too was mute on the issue though some government officials took to social media to express their views but in their individual capacity. The president, General Yoweri Museveni, did not comment on the issue publicly. He is one to sometimes comment on such issues or refer to them months later and not in the heat of the moment. He also probably saw this as an elitist debate detached from the majority of the citizenry's daily concerns and, as for his pan-Africanism passion, the African Union had issued an official statement on the matter so he didn't have to say more since that was taken care of at that level.

Lawyer and Democratic Party president Nobert Mao intellectualized racism through the lense of America's search for its soul. He wrote in his *Sunday Monitor* column, "The inbuilt bias that people of colour confront every day, the unwarranted police brutality targeting Black people and the walls of hate being erected by the bigoted rhetoric of some leaders, challenges America to renew its covenant with its founding ideals. The killing of George Floyd is just one more chapter in a book filled with the blood, sweat and tears of Black people."

Another Ugandan politician living in the UK, writing in the same newspaper noted that, "As both a victim and scholar of forced migration, I get the feelings but, also have an idea. Unless and until we have leaders across Africa (and Diaspora nations) who are genuine and committed nationalists, pan-Africanists and, for whom African lives, property, natural resources and the long term strategic interest of African peoples matter, our people will continue to suffer, be humiliated, marginalised and die needlessly in the hands of the oppressor." Quite clearly, across the media, although some Ugandans shared their own experiences with racism in Europe, Asia and USA, the issue was still projected in its international not domestic sense.

On Kampala's popular talk radio shows like the KFM Friday Panel of Journalists, the panelists took to analysis of the racist policing conundrum in the USA and the overall struggle of blacks in America as an international news topic.

Accordingly, this debate in Uganda was situated in its global context and not given a domestic touch. This merits discussion. It is not strange that the racism debate elicited by Floyd's incident did not reverberate in Uganda.

Racism in Uganda is not widespread for historical reasons. The East African country was a protectorate and not a colony as say, Kenya so there are few white settlers and despite the fact that the Ugandan economy is dominated by foreign capital, that has not translated into the foreigners immersing themselves in Ugandan society to the point of developing ideas about supremacy or racism. The Chinese who are steadily setting base in Uganda occasionally get accused of racism but theirs too are isolated incidents.

A good number of Ugandans would rather confess to being victims of tribalism back home. But the nexus between their own bubbling-below-the-surface ethnic undertones and sentiments, is a distant one, at least too distant to warrant people taking to the streets. Too distant from home to connect with.

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