

A REVIEW OF *THE NEW AFRICA: DISPATCHES FROM A CHANGING CONTINENT* BY ROBERT PRESS

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The New Africa: Dispatches from a Changing Continent is written by Robert Press and provides a very rich and extensive coverage on the place of the individual in the struggle for political as well as personal freedom in Africa. The book's *leitmotif* of human rights and the human spirit in Africa, which runs throughout the book is parsed out into three themes: democratic struggle and a fight for political freedom (Chapters 1-3); world lessons in intervention and responding to humanitarian and political crisis (Chapters 4-6); the fight and struggle for personal freedom of one kind or another (Chapter 7). The book not only examines the individual in the context of socio-political and historical events, but also looks at the role various individuals have played in changing the face of African politics in the 1990s. It is an important book for those interested in the history and contemporary discussions on democratic movement in Africa and African politics, in particular on the different connections between politics, human rights and freedom in various parts of the continent.

The book focuses mostly on East and West Africa and employs the story-telling and narrative techniques in highlighting the role played by various actors in Africa politics and the extraordinary steps that they took to eke out and win freedom both for themselves and their countries. It is both analytic and illustrative and uses pictures from photographs taken by Betty Press, the author's wife. The analytic flavor of the book is highlighted numerous in the way it draws on arguments, allusions and themes that are discussed by some prominent philosophical and literary writers. For example, it discusses Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Blaine Harden's *Africa* to address the question of why the rest of the world perceives Africa's image as bad. It draws on the Frostian themes in Robert Frost's poems, "The Road Not taken" and "Death of the Hired Man"

to show the dilemma of the United States in its intervention efforts in Somalia. The book unveils Isaiah Berlin's ideas of freedom and values and draws upon their paradigm and matrix in discussing the place of the individual in the struggle for political and personal freedom in Africa.

Having travelled extensively in sub Saharan Africa from 1987-1995 while based in Kenya working for the *Christian Science Journal*, Press and his wife witnessed some of the key events in sub Saharan Africa including the crisis in Somalia and the 1994 Rwandan genocide. The first hand experiences of some of these events put him in some unique and interesting position to report them. Being around some of the events also afforded him the chance to interview and talk to some of the key players. Some of those he interviewed included heads of state, ministers, government officials, opposition leaders, guerilla fighters, church leaders, artists, doctors, students, lawyers, activists, businessmen and women, diplomats, children, aid officials, and refugees.

Democratic Struggle and the Fight for Political Freedom (Chapters 1-3)

The author introduces the theme of democratic struggle and the fight for political freedom in chapter one, "African Freedom: The Unfinished Journey". In this chapter, Press notes that the 1990s were years of great political turmoil and upheavals in Africa following in the spirit of democratic movement whereby "a vast majority of African states moved toward an acceptance of political pluralism and rejection of... single party and military rule"¹. He points out that the push for greater political freedom by Africans is part of the global movement that sought to expand freedom for different people and groups. As part of his discussion of political freedom in Africa, Press draws on Berlin's ideas of freedom showing how the senses of freedom and its relation to value and different concepts of truth

¹ Robert Press, *The New Africa: Dispatches from a Changing Continent*, Gainesville, FL, University of Florida Press, 1999, p10.

discussed by the latter is central to understanding what is going on in Africa. Besides connecting what is going in Africa to Berlin's analysis of freedom, Press aptly examines some central themes in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to address the image of "Africa and the Darkness Label". Press, who like Conrad and several others had embarked on a trip up the Congo River, disagrees with Conrad on prefixing the phrase, "Heart of Darkness to Africa." Quoting from Harden's *Africa*, he remarks that "a century of commerce in the Congo River has turned much of its menace to Africa and burned off the Conradian gloom"². Press notes that when he and his wife rode the river on a packed boat up the Congo River they felt a sense of excitement rather than danger and contrary to the gloomy picture painted by Conrad. Press concludes by noting that the "notion of dangerous, unknown, 'dark' Africa lives on in books and in movies because we want it to live on, apart from the facts"³.

Chapter two, "Challenging the Dictators" is about the events in Mali, Nigeria and Togo in the early 1990s. Beginning with the events in Mali, the book examines the protests that led to the overthrow of the Malian President Moussa Traore in 1991. The author fingers the prominent actors in these protests to include university students, mothers and lawyers. Despite police and military brutality, many Malian students, Press notes, "stood their ground". They fought against the government and torched some government buildings. The protests, as he points out, were rewarded in 1991, when a civilian President, Alpha Omar Konare, was elected in a democratic multiparty election. Next, the chapter examines the political upheavals in Nigeria following the annulment of the June 12, 1993 Presidential elections by General Ibrahim Babangida; an election that is believed to have been won by Chief Moshood Abiola. Although the chapter highlights the mysterious death of Sani Abacha and Abiola as significant events in these upheavals it suggests that the hanging by the Abacha's administration of the

²*The New Africa*, p26.

³ *The New Africa*, p26.

human rights activist and playwright Ken Saro-wiwa along with eight others is also significant. The chapter draws parallel between the hanging with the death of the journalist Dele Giwa, who was assassinated in 1986 for his stern criticisms of government and bureaucratic corruption. In situating the events following the hanging of Saro-wiwa in the context of military dictatorship, the author asks the intriguing question, “What would Dele Giwa have written or said about Abacha’s repression and his charade about organizing a presidential election?” Quoting an October 23 1997 “Press Release” by Peter Takirambudde which describes Abacha’s transition program as a sham, the author looks at the staged-managed political program aimed at endorsing Abacha for president and the successful boycott of the April 1998 elections. The chapter concludes with selected features of the political tension in Togo. Very remarkable in the Togolese struggle for political freedom is the conference, which was tabled after a sustained pressure was mounted on Etienne Eyadema’s administration for democratic reforms.

Chapter three, “The Politics of Ambiguity” looks at the events following the protests spearheaded by the Kenyan mothers who went on daytime hunger strike demanding freedom for Kenya’s political prisoners, including their sons, who had criticized the government. The chapter highlights the efforts and roles played by individuals like Gibson Kamao Kuria, a Kenyan human rights lawyer, Njeri Kababere, an insurance woman-turned activist, Wangari Maathai (the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution not only to sustainable development, but also to democracy and peace) and Martian Shikuku, an opposition leader and former Member of Parliament. Pressured and embarrassed by these protests, including the daring public protest by the Kenyan mothers, the book points out that the Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi who had hitherto resisted political reforms

capitulated and bowed to domestic and international pressure to hold elections.⁴

World Lessons in Intervention or Responding to Humanitarian and Political Crisis (Chapters 4-6)

Events of a political nature that happened in around Africa in the early 1990s were dwarfed by two of the most important post-cold war tragedies in Somalia and Rwanda. The tragedies which happened in 1993 and 1994 respectively were in many ways gruesome, pathetic and frightening. Abuses of human rights reached its peak as many people were sent to their graves by famine and genocide. How did the world respond to these gruesome tragedies? What were the causes of these tragedies? These and several other issues are taken up in the second theme of the book. Chapter four is entitled, “Things Fall Apart” reechoing some of the themes in Nigerian author Chinua Achebe’s widely acclaimed novel of the same title. This title is so fitting because it gives some clue to the triple crisis that we are introduced to in the chapter. First, there is the raging civil war; secondly, ravaging famine; and thirdly, a failed intervention attempt by the United States and its eventual pull out with its attendant crisis. Press refers to opening pages in Achebe’s novel linking the motivation for the title “Things Fall Apart” to William Butler Yeats’s poem, “The Second Coming”. He notes as well that some of the inspiration for the second theme in general and the chapter in particular comes from Robert Frost’s poems, “The Road Not taken” and “Death of the Hired Man”. He uses “The Road Not taken” to illustrate the dilemma that various actors faced in crises in Somalia and Rwanda, in particular the United States which parallels the protagonist or wayfarer in “The Road Not Taken” who had to decide which road to take. Insightfully, the book notes that humans travel several roads simultaneously in life and the decisions

⁴ In 1992, Daniel Arap Moi held Kenyan first ever multiparty elections which he “won”.

made as to which roads to travel could and do make all the *difference* now and in the future. In the case of the wayfarer, he takes “the road less travelled by” and, that for him made all the difference, as it was for the United Nations and the United States who were squarely in opposition to General Mohammed Farah Aideed and his militia during the Somalia crisis but chose the path “less traveled by”. The road less travelled by marked the failure of the United Nations and the United States in their peace keeping mission in Somalia, which contrast sharply with the peace efforts of the Somalian community leaders via the Baroma Conference in February 1993, which proved successful. As Press points out, the successes that the elders recorded during the conference comes in part to their intuitive recognition of the politics and culture of Somalia, and this is demonstrated by the way the conference brought together the major ethnic groups in Somaliland.

In chapter five, “Genocide Ignored”, the central argument is that although it is important that the 1994 genocide in Rwanda that claimed the lives of about 1 million people should not be seen in isolation from other chapters of genocide or mass killings what sets apart that of Rwanda is not just its barbaric nature but the way the world watched and reacted. Press draws our attention to other world genocides: the 1915 massacre in Turkey of some 350 000 to 1.5 million Armenians; the nearly 6 million Jews killed under Hitler during the Nazi holocaust; the indiscriminate murder of tens of millions of Chinese during the Japanese occupation from 1931-1945; the *Holodomor* from 1932-1933 under Joseph Stalin, which collectivized and starved villages, leading to the death of millions of Ukrainians, Russians and other people of the former Soviet Union. The book notes that while everyone “of these mass killings was horrible, but somehow the Rwandan killings come off looking particularly barbaric”.⁵ Press rejects the view that the 1994 Rwandan genocide or massacres were merely acts of “savagery” and argues that it was no way different in kind and degree and execution from the

⁵ *The New Africa*, p222.

massacres of Muslims by Serbs in Bosnia and the near annihilation of Europe's Jews in the Nazi Holocaust. Using article 2 of the December 9, 1948 UN resolution, the author sets out a definition of "genocide", listing its five features. He quotes some individuals who described the Rwandan massacre as "genocide" and notes that with the exception of France which sent some troops to secure one corner of the country for one month, the whole world watched while Rwandans were slaughtered in their thousands. Noting the admittance of several UN officials and former US President Bill Clinton in 1998 that the United States and other countries did not do enough to try to halt the genocide, Press contends that "the United States and the rest of the international community had a moral obligation—and, under the UN Charter, a legal one—to try to stop the genocide".⁶ The chapter climaxes with a look at two noteworthy events. Firstly, the UN Tribunal on Rwanda, which began in 1996 in Arusha, Tanzania aimed at bringing to justice the perpetrators of the genocide or killings by installment in Burundi. The tribunal found Jean Kambanda, Rwandan Prime Minister at the time of the government-led genocide and former Major of Gitarama, Jean Paul Akayesu guilty in September 1998. Secondly, the trial of the genocide perpetrators held by the new regime in Rwanda. The first public executions of those found guilty were carried out amid strong criticism from international human rights organizations.

Chapter six, "One Family Escapes From Rwanda" describes how the family of Faustin Hitiyise escaped the systematic killings in Rwanda with incredible feat. This account provides an example and an insight into what the human spirit can accomplish in difficult and trying situations.

⁶ *The New Africa*, p227.

The Fight and the Struggle for Personal Freedom (Chapter7)

This chapter, “Personal Freedom” presents individual freedom sought in the midst of political and economic turmoil in Africa. The book singles out some of these individuals who had to expand their education and earnings to break free of ignorance and poverty. The author cryptically describes this change and quest for personal freedom as “a revolution without guns”. Notably among those that achieved this “revolution” is a Nigerian artist, Nike Davis, who sought his personal freedom from abusive, polygamous marriage by establishing a tuition-free school of art in Oshogbo, South West Nigeria for low income students. There is likewise the fine example of the Kenyan shopkeeper, Francis Muthee and Togolese baker, Dunyah Ablavi, who used small loans to expand their businesses. Also mentioned in this chapter is the determination and initiative by a Kenyan couple, Alphonse Muang and his wife, Angela to farm on dry land, as well as the parts played by women jurists in Mali against the country’s practice of female circumcision. The book also highlights the exemplary efforts by some students and teachers in Sudan and Somalia to pursue education despite their countries ravaged by two civil wars and the absence of basic infrastructure, particularly those that supported learning.

The New Africa: Dispatches from a Changing Continent should come in handy for contemporary historical and political discourse in Africa. It should motivate readers whether outside or in Africa to see the role that ordinary folks can play in political struggles, in winning freedom for themselves and their countries, and in shaping the future of their societies — facts that have been well amplified by the Arab Spring that began in December 2010 in Tunisia.

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