



A New Dark Age: The Case for an African Renaissance

By Joe Kobuthi and Darius Okolla



Africa is in a steep democratic recession. According to the [Freedom House](#) think tank, just 11 per cent of the continent is politically “free”, and the average level of democracy (understood as respect for political rights and civil liberties) has fallen in each of the last 14 years. The Ibrahim Index of African Governance [shows](#) that democratic progress lags far behind citizens’ expectations. The vast majority of Africans want to live in a democracy, but the proportion of those who believe they actually do falls almost every year. The future of African freedoms is in peril.

As for the “independence project” that birthed the current African states, it has been cannibalised by the political class which—apart from engaging in nefarious activities to consolidate power, gobbling up resources and terrorising the citizenry—has proven to lack the imagination to curate a vision for the continent. For now, we do not know what to do, nor do we know where and how to find the answers to address this socio-political crisis.

Moreover, liberal democracy—characterised by the enjoyment of legally guaranteed freedoms and rights by individuals—has wobbled over the past two decades. Today we are witnessing an upsurge in fascism, parochialism and narrow nationalisms as a backlash to a neoliberalism gone wild. All over Europe and in other parts of the world, a new kind of nationalism is in vogue.

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In Africa, where this model is a relatively recent import, its symptoms, including deepening inequality and the alienation and exclusion of entire sections of the population, form the most compelling economic trend of the era. Add to this, writes John Githongo, the growing currency of identity politics—which is extremely comforting in this era of existential uncertainties—and the symptoms of the malaise are manifesting themselves more quickly and causing more intense social and political dislocations than ever before. Ultimately, the economic logic of the market, and those who participate in it, is irrational; it does not typically self-correct and social/political distress intensifies the power of identity politics (religion, gender, tribe, clan, sect, etc.) and hollow populism.

The convergence of political and economic interests in society has led to a corruption of democracy as it has come to be owned by [oligarchies with the power to buy elections](#) at worst and, at best, to purchase policy even in so-called mature democracies. As a result, democracy is threatened by a new wave of disaster capitalism which, at its core, is thriving on the subversion of the state for the extraction of resources.

Underlying all this is Western indifference and, sometimes, hostility. Today, even Francis Fukuyama, one of the most ardent proponents of the liberal democratic model, has acknowledged the erosion of political power and the decline in political trust in public affairs generally. Indeed, with the imminent collapse of the neoliberal model, the “[end of history](#)” mantra no longer holds any meaning.

In the case of Africa, the neoliberal ideological assault has already devastated the social fabric and, as spaces for progressive discourse and debate, our knowledge production centres have already been destroyed. For instance, [notes Professor Issa Shivji](#), university structures have been corporatised. Courses have lost their integrity as they have been [semesterised and modularised](#). Short courses proliferate. Basic research has been undermined as policy consultancy overwhelms faculty. Knowledge production has been substituted by online information gathering.

As a consequence, the recent rise of “new nationalisms” has caught intellectuals in the [global South by surprise](#). They didn’t anticipate it and nor do they know how to react to it. Moreover, the fourth industrial revolution, which began at the turn of the century, builds on the digital revolution, characterised by machine learning and artificial intelligence, has fundamentally changed the arena of contestation for local and global narrative dominance. Past models of civic engagement are proving barren as traditional institutions (media, civil society and academia) are still struggling to find a footing in this new dispensation. The place of the [intellectual in this digital Dark Age](#) shall prove instrumental in helping society to make sense of itself.

The failed independence project

While the independence struggle delivered freedom and self-rule (at least in theory), the political freedoms envisaged and attained without a corresponding economic sovereignty to anchor and totalise these freedoms left black populations vulnerable to imperial influences and their cronies.

The effect of this is the collapse of the ‘independence project’ which has effectively not delivered on the aspirations that gave rise to the anti-colonial movements that birthed it. Fifty-plus years after independence, the African state is in a worse situation than it was at independence. Independence and all that it portends is now over. Crony capitalism is entrenched and the vast majority of the

populations have become disillusioned with the State. Evidently, the palace coups, civil unrest and regime changes happening across Africa are symptomatic of a political class that has been devoured by its own contradictions.

This state of affairs, observes [Kalundi Serumaga](#), presents our desperate, venal governing class with opportunities for greater venality. Having long exhausted whatever political legitimacy the “attainment of independence” gave them, they have continued looking for new means of obtaining some form of legitimacy even as they continue to plunder.

Moreover, the [new opportunities](#) for plunder are now blinding our leaders to the very real dangers of the unprincipled relationships that could leave our descendants in perennial debt bondage at best and a new form of slavery in a morbid form. This is the worst possible kind of group to have in charge of making the key decisions at this very critical point in African history.

Trade is war and international firms and [tycoons understand this](#). The modern frameworks of international business decision-making are rooted in racism, predatory systems and opaque structures designed to rip off African resources using unmitigated and rigged international laws and concessions.

There are a number of ways in which neocolonialism and capitalism, individually as well as collectively, disinherit the African continent and rob it of critical resources meant for its people.

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[Seven of the top ten largest firms](#) in Kenya are British and the top 100 firms are heavily skewed towards foreign ownership. This is replicated across the continent. Private capital from racist and predatory Wall Street-listed firms generates undue pressure on hapless local leaders who either cave in to kickbacks or are voted out through buying the political influence of rival powers. These private capital tentacles have sunk deep into African society, exerting incredible pressure on the direction and nature of the legislation that is passed and implemented across Africa.

Modern barbarians

The wobbling Euro-American edifice, which is the culmination of the 2000-year-old Greco-Roman-Hebrew Caucasian civilisational instinct, portends a return to a new Dark Age. While there exist never-ending contestations about when a historical period starts and when it ends, historians often structure civilisations as having gone through nine socio-political stages lasting about 250 years. A civilisation accommodates two to three empires and lasts roughly 500 years. The much-hyped decline of the United States, therefore, marks not just the decline of an empire but, by extension, the eventual decay and decline of the Euro-American superstructure.

The prophecies by historians like Jim Nelson Black and Charles Colson largely point to the return of barbarian instincts dominated by modern barbarians—not like [the Huns, the Visigoths, the Ostrogoths and Vandals](#) of the 400s AD—but with a new form of barbarism. A casual foray into the politics of identity reveals a bizarre strain of unchecked instincts going as far as to seeking to legalise paedophilia as part of minority politics. The barbarian of the new Dark Age is therefore said to be well-attuned to the social finesse of modernity while still harbouring the dark primitivism of unfettered tastes and desires. He is able to justify the most grotesque of beliefs with the finest

eloquence of language and fluency of ideas.

Africa could dominate the next century

Meanwhile, Africa's rediscovery of its ancient heritage is founded on a cultural production that is largely aided by a soaring interest in the realities of ancient African civilisations, a re-forging of African identities and a democratisation of knowledge production and dissemination by digital media and other alternative platforms. The African imaginary in the main thus far seems to be largely secular, quite reactionary, and predicated on the import of identity politics from the West. Truth is, the current global shift occasioned by the rise of new empires such as China and India is precipitating a fluidity of ideas in the international marketplace in such a way that if Africa manoeuvres strategically in that marketplace, it could dominate the next century.

In the cycle of human civilisation, with its periods of growth and downturns spanning centuries, Africa has also inevitably occupied a dominant position by waging war against Rome and other empires. In total, [of the 200 empires](#) chronicled to have dominated the last 6,000 years, at least 37 were either African or extended to Africa, bringing with them civilisational goodies from across the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

As is the norm with imperial dominance, each African empire infused human existence with certain sensibilities in the zigzagging path from ancient history to modernity. From law and politics, philosophy, art and social courtesies, moral codes and military prowess, each empire possesses a dominant ethic which aids its ascent, and which it bequeaths to the world.

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Even supposing the absence of a clear export to the wider human race, at the very least Africans can take pride in the mere existence and sophistication of these empires and ancient cities. Axum, for example, was among the first empires to fully [endorse an official religion](#) around the same time as Constantine issued his edict in the 300s AD. Although one may argue against the nationalisation of religion—more so Christianity, given the hegemonic undertones of such endorsement—such a move unifies the metaphysics of an empire, providing its citizens with a commonality of ethics and moral codes.

And so, for an African renaissance to flourish, a line has to be drawn in the sands of history reconnecting the broken and disjointed retelling of African history such that the end product is a wholesome narration of the path the African soul has trodden from the medieval world into modernity. In the arts, a string from Timbuktu and Alexandria to modern studies about Africa; in military strategy, a link between the [Great Hannibal Barca](#) of North Africa to modern military strategies.

The recent uprisings in Algeria and Sudan have ignited revolutionary fervour across sub-Saharan Africa, rekindling a hope and a desire for change, whose final outcome isn't yet clear. Political revolutions, unconnected from clear pedagogy, can easily precipitate unintended chaos on a scale [often far more anarchic than](#) the organised repression of the toppled regime. Revolutions devoid of a guiding ideology and a critical pool of enlightened individuals generate a crusading fervour that is a recipe for ever greater barbarism.

A coalescing of historical forces, renewed knowledge production and an Africa teeming with continental artists, intellectuals, writers, entertainers, and local conglomerates, from media houses, and record labels to nightclubs, manufacturing plants, civic organisation, religious movements and theatres, can help fuel a thriving African renaissance.

Currently, the [54 states](#) that lie within the colonial African boundaries have succumbed to the lightning speed of technology and finance in ways such that the utility value of nation-states as the critical form of organisation must give way to cross-border cultural liaisons and imports. Communitarianism revives the age-old desire for new forms of human organisation unmitigated by the ever expanding bureaucracy of statecraft and its burdening tentacles.

By its very nature renaissance in and of itself carries a level of in-built cultural awakening which potentially infuses a vibrant consciousness in the masses. Contrasted with revolutions where the drastic takedown of symbolic leaders within the old structures creates an illusion of change, renaissance instigates the production of new knowledge, identity and consciousness with a far longer-lasting impact on group and self-identity. Writing on the [Harlem Renaissance](#), the journalist and social critic [Alain Locke](#) referred to renaissance as “a spiritual coming of age” of blacks who were clasping their “first chances for group expression and self-determination”.

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Digitisation and the attendant democratisation of cultural production and knowledge exchange amplifies critical yet marginalised voices in ways that upstage the age-old elitist models of knowledge production. Renaissance, therefore, isn't so much the creation of newer forms of cultural and artistic expression as much as it is the retrieved anthropological knowledge of our ancient origins and developments. It is the drawing of a link to our unbroken African histories—grounded in a renewed interest in social production—which for now are sadly domiciled in imperial vaults across the oceans.

A demographic that is increasingly young and black, averaging 2.5 billion in number, will dominate the global landscape circa 2050AD and tilt the [global racial numerical dominance](#) towards the global South with massive implications. Demographic explosions, if coupled with distributive policies and expansionary goals, translate the numerical advantage into demographic dividends whose payoff lasts for decades. Conversely, when saddled with decaying nation-states led by kleptocratic and unimaginative elites within vassal states—such as in Kenya and South Africa—sharp increases in population translate into a demographic burden.

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Africa does not have much time left. We face environmental collapse, ethnic cleansing and debt bondage. Decades of cultural propaganda have desensitised many of the youth to the dangers inherent in losing cultural sovereignty. This, coupled with the cynical and inept example set by the older generation in power, have created societies that are very vulnerable to any passing idea that could lead to a takeover. The urgency to reignite African consciousness given the rapid shift of the current global paradigms away from the Euro-American centre, places the burden of restitutive

demands on the African intellectuals given that they are the current producers of knowledge. Demography isn't always destiny and if not well managed, such a population explosion—and the rising pressure on nature and urban systems—could actually precipitate widespread ecological destruction.

Africa's primary hope in many ways isn't domiciled in the hare-brained ideas and visions peddled by middle-aged white men colluding in the plunder of African resources or the hegemonic gaze, whether facing East or West. The crucible of African renewal will be a deliberate decision by Africans to construct a narrative of a robust, generative, diverse identity born of the African experience.

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