



American Spring: How Trump ‘Africanised’ the United States and Sparked an Anti-Racism Movement

By Rasna Warah



The huge human cost of the coronavirus pandemic, the economic shock brought about by high levels of unemployment and business closures, and the suffocating to death of a black man by a white police officer in Minneapolis have created a perfect storm in America: like the death of Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian hawker who set himself on fire in an act of protest against police corruption and ill-treatment (an incident that ignited what is referred to as the Arab Spring in the Middle East and North Africa), the death of George Floyd has sparked an “American Spring” of sorts, with protesters demanding racial justice and equality in a country that has been divided along colour lines for four centuries, since the first slave ship arrived on America’s shores.

A week after Floyd’s murder, the streets of American cities were flooded with paramilitary security forces known as the National Guard, which shot at protestors. Many stunned Africans could not believe the kinds of scenes being played out in the United States – riots on streets, burning of shops and cars, and a leader under siege by citizens who, in the middle of a pandemic, have thrown caution to the wind and taken to the streets in anger, defying social distancing directives.

US President Donald Trump, who has all the traits of a narcissistic African Big Man, threatened to

call in the military to quell the violence. (If this had happened in an African country, the international media would have had no hesitation in labelling him a dictator.) America is beginning to look like a failed African state.

Protests across the United States, some of which have turned ugly and resulted in a number of deaths and thousands of arrests, have turned American cities into battlegrounds. The video of a white police officer kneeling on the neck of an unarmed black man who died as a result of suffocation has mobilised an entire country to take to the streets in protest against systemic racism. (In Kenya, on the other hand, where [at least fifteen people have died](#) as a result of police brutality since a night curfew was imposed on 27 March, nobody has taken to the streets to protest the brutality or to demand justice for the victims. [Extrajudicial killings](#) by the police are quite common here, even during normal times.)

For Africans watching the unfolding uprising from afar, the scenes shown on television screens and on social media sites seem eerily familiar, but disconcerting. Suddenly the tables have turned: America is being described in the same way that many African countries (and other countries that elicit a combination of shock, horror and pity)) are depicted. The façade of democracy that America has been showing to the world appears to be crumbling. As the Ugandan journalist Charles Onyango-Obbo half-jokingly suggested in a tweet, the Western media usually interviews Western experts every time there is a disaster or political turmoil in an African country; maybe now it is time for African experts to be interviewed by the same Western media on the consequences of state failure, democratic fragility and regime illegitimacy in the United States.

The impact of the coronavirus on the United States was also hard to digest, given that America is one of the wealthiest countries in the world, with among the most sophisticated and well-equipped hospitals. People on the African continent, who are used to receiving food aid (when it is not stolen or diverted), watched in horror as millions of unemployed and homeless Americans queued for food and other supplies donated by charities. Those who have suffered epidemics like Ebola cannot believe their eyes when they see unclaimed American bodies ravaged by COVID-19 being buried in mass graves. (Mass graves in Africa are usually associated with genocide, ethnic cleansing or other atrocities, not disease.)

The late Binyavanga Wainaina, author of the satirical essay, "How to Write About Africa", would no doubt have felt vindicated had he been around to see how American journalists are now having to apply the adjectives that they reserve for African basket-case banana republics to describe their own country. With the highest death toll from the coronavirus, and nationwide anti-racism protests, including in the capital Washington DC, the United States is beginning to look like Egypt during its tumultuous Arab Spring uprising (which, unfortunately, did not bring about the expected radical change) and Sudan during its recent revolution.

It is an important moment for Africans who view America as the land of equal opportunity. That rosy image has forever changed since Trump assumed office, and since the pandemic, which neither the president nor his trusted aides seem to be able to contain. Africans eager to study or live in the United States are now having second thoughts. A Kenya-born academic I recently had a conversation with wondered whether moving to the US was the right choice after all. Despite her US passport, she now feels trapped in a country where black lives are under constant threat. Will Africans living in the US move back to their home countries where at least they do not suffer racial discrimination?

Racism: The problem that never went away

Or perhaps America has always had the potential for a revolution like this one and Trump has only helped Americans and the world to see the fault lines that lie hidden beneath the country's

democratic ideals and shining skyscrapers. Now we all know that America is a deeply divided society both racially and in terms of income. It carries the scars of slavery and inequality to this day. The transatlantic slave trade, America's "original sin", it seems, has not only damaged African Americans, but their white tormentors as well. America has not learned what history tells us: You cannot move forward as a society until you have addressed and healed from the wounds of the past.

In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr, whose assassination in 1968 sparked similar protests, talked of America as a society that had been "poisoned to its soul by racism". The Nobel laureate Toni Morrison described racism as "a social construct" and an "insult". She believed that the main function of racism was distraction - to keep black people so busy explaining themselves to white people that they would not have time for anything else.

James Baldwin, the celebrated black American author, described black people as "the scapegoat" of America's ills. He wrote that bigotry in the United States was "enough to make prophets and angels weep" and that black people in America lived under "martial law" where the police operate with "arrogant autonomy". The way America deals with its "Negro problem", he said, was either by killing black people or incarcerating them. He also said, "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time".

Ta-Nehisi Coates, the contemporary African American writer who has been described as "the new James Baldwin", explains how racism "disembodies" black people. The question Coates seeks to answer is: How does a black man live freely in his body when that body is under constant threat of being exterminated?

Through personal anecdotes of his youth in a rough neighbourhood in West Baltimore, to his days at Howard University, the first all-black university in America, Coates shows how fear is an ever-present feeling among African Americans, and why this fear transcends generations. He poignantly explains in his book, *Between the World and Me*, why, after more than a century since slavery ended, black people in the United States are still under the threat of being humiliated, locked up, beaten or killed.

He describes white America as a syndicate arranged to protect white power and privilege, which are used to dominate and control black bodies. "Sometimes this power is direct (lynching) and sometimes it is insidious (redlining)".

Donald Trump's presidency seems to have entrenched white power and privilege to heights that have not been witnessed in the United States in recent decades. His nonchalant attitude towards white supremacists and his belittling of women (including television journalists) and minorities have apparently not diminished his allure among his base. Trump represents an alt-right that is uncivilised and unapologetic. The anti-racism fury engulfing his presidency now is a reaction to his unadulterated bigotry.

However, we must also accept that no US president, not even Barack Obama, successfully handled the scourge of racism in America. Obama, the great hope of black Americans, failed to deliver racial justice and equality, even though he had a large number of people of colour in his administration. The Black Lives Matter movement emerged during his tenure at the White House. Obama, like most of his predecessors, did not overtly seek to address the race question in America. It's possible that the fact of him being black (or rather, mixed race) prevented him from adopting an explicitly anti-racism agenda for fear of appearing too "radical". Unfortunately, because the race question remained unresolved, white supremacists found a firm foothold in the Trump camp.

"Perhaps the deepest frustration of thinking about 1968 and 2020 is the time elapsed, the

opportunities squandered, the lip service paid,” wrote David Remnick in the 31 May 2020 edition of *The New Yorker*. “In the realm of criminal justice, the prison population began to skyrocket under Ronald Reagan and kept on accelerating for decades, until midway through the Obama Administration. Black Lives Matter began, in 2013, at least in part because even the Obama Presidency, for all its promise, proved unable to exert anything like a decisive influence on issues of racism and police abuse”.

Many analysts believe that the current outburst of rage is a natural outcome of the financial crisis of 2008, when big corporations and banks were bailed out while thousands of working and middle class people lost their homes in what is known as the subprime mortgage crisis. This gave birth to the Occupy Wall Street movement, and perhaps sowed the seeds of a Trump presidency, which capitalised on people’s mistrust of government.

However, although Trump appears to appeal to white working class people, his rhetoric belies a man who has deep contempt for those who are outside mainstream corporate America, of which he is a prominent member. He lashes out at minorities, be they Mexicans, Muslims or women. He racialises everything, including the coronavirus, which he refers to as “the Chinese virus”. He names and shames his adversaries on Twitter, and even announces his policies via this social media platforms - which is unprecedented in the history of the United States.

Trump is not just a conservative with a loud mouth and bad manners, he is an ultra-conservative of the alt-right variety. Steve Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist and a man with a vision of a dystopian world where might is always right, was Vice President of Cambridge Analytica, the disgraced data mining company that is associated with the Brexit referendum and Trump’s election (as well as with Uhuru Kenyatta’s 2013 election campaign).

White men on their necks

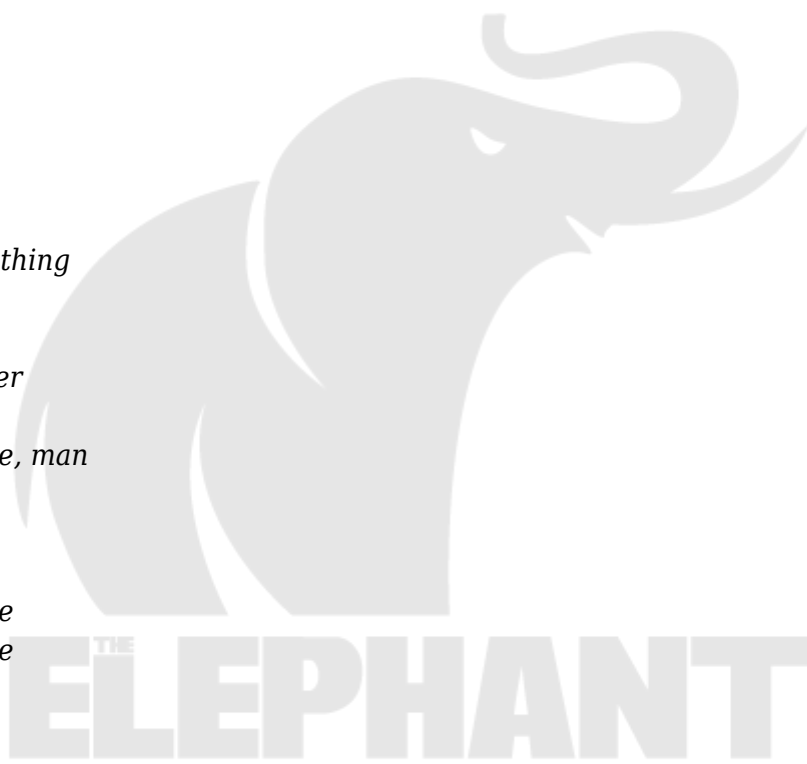
In a radio interview in Chicago in 1961, James Baldwin said: “The only thing that unites all black men everywhere is, as far as I can tell, the fact that white men are on their necks. What I’m curious about is what will happen when this is no longer true. For the first time in the memory of anybody living, black men have their destinies in their own hands. What will come out then, is a very great, a very loaded question”. (African leaders who fought against European colonialism, but who, after gaining independence for their countries, ended up domesticating the European colonial model in these countries - a model that did not deliver dignity, wealth or emancipation to the majority of their people - might want to pay attention to Baldwin’s prophetic words.)

Now, nearly sixty years after that interview, a black man with a white man literally on his neck has galvanised America. Will his death bring about the change that America needs? It is hard to tell, but one thing is certain: the United States of America will never be the same again.

And lest we forget, here are the final words of George Floyd before his untimely death.

*“It’s my face man
I didn’t do nothing serious man
please
please
please I can’t breathe
please man
please somebody
please man
I can’t breathe*

*I can't breathe
please
(inaudible)
man can't breathe, my face
just get up
I can't breathe
please, a knee on my neck
I can't breathe
shit
I will
I can't move
mama
mama
I can't
my knee
my neck
I'm through
I'm through
I'm claustrophobic
my stomach hurt
my neck hurts
everything hurts
some water or something
please
please
I can't breathe officer
don't kill me
they're gonna kill me, man
come on man
I cannot breathe
I cannot breathe
they're gonna kill me
they're gonna kill me
I can't breathe
I can't breathe
please sir
please
please
please I can't breathe"*



George Floyd was pronounced dead shortly thereafter.

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