

Remarks by President Obama to the People of Africa

(Excerpts)

Mandela Hall
African Union Headquarters
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On dignity/human rights:

[...] Dignity -- that basic idea that by virtue of our common humanity, no matter where we come from, or what we look like, we are all born equal, touched by the grace of God. Every person has worth. Every person matters. Every person deserves to be treated with decency and respect. Throughout much of history, mankind did not see this. Dignity was seen as a virtue reserved to those of rank and privilege, kings and elders. It took a revolution of the spirit, over many centuries, to open our eyes to the dignity of every person. And around the world, generations have struggled to put this idea into practice in laws and in institutions.

So, too, here in Africa. This is the cradle of humanity, and ancient African kingdoms were home to great libraries and universities. But the evil of slavery took root not only abroad, but here on the continent. Colonialism skewed Africa's economy and robbed people of their capacity to shape their own destiny. Eventually, liberation movements grew. And 50 years ago, in a great burst of self-determination, Africans rejoiced as foreign flags came down and your national flags went up. As South Africa's Albert Luthuli said at the time, "the basis for peace and brotherhood in Africa is being restored by the resurrection of national sovereignty and independence, of equality and the dignity of man." [...]

Nelson Mandela taught us, "to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others." [...]

Every one of us is equal. Every one of us has worth. Every one of us matters. And when we respect the freedom of others -- no matter the color of their skin, or how they

pray or who they are or who they love -- we are all more free. Your dignity depends on my dignity, and my dignity depends on yours. Imagine if everyone had that spirit in their hearts. Imagine if governments operated that way. Just imagine what the world could look like -- the future that we could bequeath these young people. [...]

On economic development

[...]A half-century into this independence era, it is long past time to put aside old stereotypes of an Africa forever mired in poverty and conflict. The world must recognize Africa's extraordinary progress. Today, Africa is one of the fastest-growing regions in the world. [...]

As Africa changes, I've called on the world to change its approach to Africa. So many Africans have told me, we don't want just aid, we want trade that fuels progress. We don't want patrons, we want partners who help us build our own capacity to grow. We don't want the indignity of dependence, we want to make our own choices and determine our own future.

As President, I've worked to transform America's relationship with Africa -- so that we're truly listening to our African friends and working together, as equal partners. And I'm proud of the progress that we've made. We've boosted American exports to this region, part of trade that supports jobs for Africans and Americans. To sustain our momentum -- and with the bipartisan support of some of the outstanding members of Congress who are here today -- 20 of them who are here today -- I recently signed the 10-year renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act. [...]

We've launched major initiatives to promote food security, and public health and access to electricity, and to prepare the next generation of African leaders and entrepreneurs -- investments that will help fuel Africa's rise for decades to come. Last year, as the Chairwoman noted, I welcomed nearly 50 African presidents and prime ministers to Washington so we could begin a new chapter of cooperation. And by coming to the African Union today, I'm looking to build on that commitment.

I believe Africa's rise is not just important for Africa, it's important to the entire world. We will not be able to meet the challenges of our time -- from ensuring a strong global economy to facing down violent extremism, to combating climate change, to ending hunger and extreme poverty -- without the voices and contributions of one billion Africans. [...]

On corruption:

[...] Nothing will unlock Africa's economic potential more than ending the cancer of corruption. And you are right that it is not just a problem of Africa, it is a problem of

those who do business with Africa. It is not unique to Africa -- corruption exists all over the world, including in the United States. But here in Africa, corruption drains billions of dollars from economies that can't afford to lose billions of dollars -- that's money that could be used to create jobs and build hospitals and schools. And when someone has to pay a bribe just to start a business or go to school, or get an official to do the job they're supposed to be doing anyway -- that's not "the African way." It undermines the dignity of the people you represent.

Only Africans can end corruption in their countries. As African governments commit to taking action, the United States will work with you to combat illicit financing, and promote good governance and transparency and rule of law. And we already have strong laws in place that say to U.S. companies, you can't engage in bribery to try to get business -- which not all countries have. And we actually enforce it and police it.

And let me add that criminal networks are both fueling corruption and threatening Africa's precious wildlife -- and with it, the tourism that many African economies count on. So America also stands with you in the fight against wildlife trafficking. That's something that has to be addressed.

But, ultimately, the most powerful antidote to the old ways of doing things is this new generation of African youth. History shows that the nations that do best are the ones that invest in the education of their people. You see, in this information age, jobs can flow anywhere, and they typically will flow to where workers are literate and highly skilled and online. And Africa's young people are ready to compete. I've met them -- they are hungry, they are eager. They're willing to work hard. So we've got to invest in them. As Africa invests in education, our entrepreneurship programs are helping innovators start new businesses and create jobs right here in Africa. And the men and women in our Young African Leaders Initiative today will be the leaders who can transform business and civil society and governments tomorrow.

Africa's progress will depend on development that truly lifts countries from poverty to prosperity -- because people everywhere deserve the dignity of a life free from want. A child born in Africa today is just as equal and just as worthy as a child born in Asia or Europe or America. At the recent development conference here in Addis, African leadership helped forge a new global compact for financing that fuels development. And under the AU's leadership, the voice of a united Africa will help shape the world's next set of development goals, and you're pursuing a vision of the future that you want for Africa. [...]

On term limits:

[...] I have to also say that Africa's democratic progress is also at risk when leaders refuse to step aside when their terms end. Now, let me be honest with you -- I do not

understand this. I am in my second term. It has been an extraordinary privilege for me to serve as President of the United States. I cannot imagine a greater honor or a more interesting job. I love my work. But under our Constitution, I cannot run again. I can't run again. I actually think I'm a pretty good President -- I think if I ran I could win. But I can't.

So there's a lot that I'd like to do to keep America moving, but the law is the law. And no one person is above the law. Not even the President. And I'll be honest with you -- I'm looking forward to life after being President. I won't have such a big security detail all the time. It means I can go take a walk. I can spend time with my family. I can find other ways to serve. I can visit Africa more often. The point is, I don't understand why people want to stay so long. Especially when they've got a lot of money.

When a leader tries to change the rules in the middle of the game just to stay in office, it risks instability and strife -- as we've seen in Burundi. And this is often just a first step down a perilous path. And sometimes you'll hear leaders say, well, I'm the only person who can hold this nation together. If that's true, then that leader has failed to truly build their nation.

You look at Nelson Mandela -- Madiba, like George Washington, forged a lasting legacy not only because of what they did in office, but because they were willing to leave office and transfer power peacefully. And just as the African Union has condemned coups and illegitimate transfers of power, the AU's authority and strong voice can also help the people of Africa ensure that their leaders abide by term limits and their constitutions. Nobody should be president for life.

And your country is better off if you have new blood and new ideas. I'm still a pretty young man, but I know that somebody with new energy and new insights will be good for my country. It will be good for yours, too, in some cases. [...]