

*Audacious Indeed! **Muyanja Ssenyonga***

It is disheartening to witness images of hapless human beings at the mercy of natural elements in its fullest extent in the Southern part of Africa. This is a region, which many took for granted was the basket of the sub-region and possibly the entire continent. There is no doubt theirs is a life that is seen in terms of days, rather years of being alive. And this at a time when free and fair elections, involving hardly fought campaigns where many of the unlucky citizens succumbed with the hope that those who perish in the struggle do so to ensure a better future for the survivors. No doubt today democracy to them is no longer a sacred wand, which on being juggled conjures up miracles and solutions to complex problems. Democracy has not helped them avert hunger, malnourishment, and incapacitation and that is unforgettable and unforgivable experience.

Undoubtedly the best friend is whoever enables them survive for another harrowing day by doling out another meal, which should be well understood by those who claim not only to represent them but also to lead them. Yet what does one hear echoing in the sub region? Leaders of the worst hit countries see this as the golden opportunity to not only pronounce principles but for the first time to stick to them regardless of the attendant effects on their subordinates. The resolution is not to allow their subjects to eat genetically modified food, because the process of its development is shrouded in deep secrecy, some stout leaders they proudly charge! One leader went as far as calling it not worthy eaten by human beings! And this at a time when the hungry had reached the extent of slaughtering dying dogs to save at least another day! Such leaders should not have had the misfortune of missing a single meal for even single day let alone losing a member of his family to the throes of famine and starvation! Such a misplaced attitude really shows how distant some 'democratic' leaders in Africa are still far from those who elected them into office. They of course read about the problems faced in the press, censored to reflect official line. Indeed the crisis couldn't have taken such disastrous trend had the leaders known that personal pride should never take precedence over human lives. Warnings were issued by international agencies on the impending danger, which the cocksure official policy dismissed as premature and ill intentioned. There is no doubt that the reason behind such denials was not because state officials did not know the issues at stake, rather out of political expedience they had to save their faces by how well everything was under control. It is well established in diplomatic circles that a country that can not feed its people is no state at all and used to be called a banana republic those days long gone by, hence the reluctance shown by 'strong' leaders to agree to food assistance even at the cost of pauperizing those people who stood in sweltering sunshine and drenching rain days on end to catapult them into coveted power.

The dying millions in Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe have pent-up anger about their plight, which thanks to the muzzled press they can't ventilate. If the press is to take an independent line, the government has many channels at its disposal to send home the message blatantly about who is actually in power. Being declared subversive, violator of public order and security are among the arsenals governments have the liberty to dispense liberally if they so wish. Not even the foreign press is free, since being personae non grata welcomes whoever is foolhardy enough to challenge state policy, however much its flaws.

So, the shocking fate of their citizens is not 'emboldening' enough to take impromptu visits to nations with buffer stocks to state the case of their peoples. It is rare for heads of state and governments in Africa whose countries are facing natural disasters to take the initiative to marshal world support on their own, possibly convinced that such a role is better left to the selected foreign media. Surprisingly even the local press are rarely the first to disclose such state 'secrets' for fear of recriminations from powers that be. Is it because in line with African tradition those commiserating are not expected to go knocking on neighbors' doors for anything that help relieve their sorrow and bereavement? If indeed that is the case the same thing should apply to expensive global-shuttling on begging missions, money out of which they are sure will never go to intended causes!

For the gallant sons of a nation, pride should be derived from providing peace and security, infrastructure, guidance and initiative for conducting economic activities. Early warning systems should part and parcel of state food security rather than waiting for foreign press to prey at anything they think can sharpen the sympathy and philanthropy of people back home even if this is done at the cost of dehumanizing, humiliating, and humbling the all aspects of life of the people they ostensibly want to help (recall the telling image of the Mozambiquan mother with her tree-horn baby being rescued from the tree by Hell piloted South African White soldier).

It should be enthralling and condescending too, for heads of state and governments of developed nations, who on jetting out of public transport planes saunter into conference rooms with a minimum of entourage and

protocol, as stingy in throwing cocktail parties as they are guarded in striking economic deals, and ready to help out those in dire need using state approved funds, in a word statesmen. In attendance too, are colleagues from the developing south who jet in with their presidential planes, saunter in with the most pomp often escorted by planeloads of entourage, prefer the most exquisite treatment, and spend fortunes on parties, brisk at striking shadowy armament deals, hardly making any hint about hunger because it is denigrates their status as heads of states. Do our leaders feel any shame!

May be as democracy becomes entrenched the time for rulers will come to pass, opening the way for leaders, who don not only pay lip service to lead, but are seen to lead their people in good and bad times. Then, and only then can an African have the luxury of experiencing hallucinations about throwing off the shackles of poverty, let alone live it. One wonders how long frightened Africans must wait? It is in times of hardships when men with leadership qualities not only come to the fore, but also are projected to serve and salvage their folks from immense suffering. The good thing is that Africa is not short on these!