

Growing up Under the Wings of a Giant: My Reflection on the Person of H.E. Benjamin William Mkapa as Self-Reliant, Masterful Mentor and an Unapologetic Institutionalist.

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If there is one contingency that mankind has never been able to fully come to terms with, is the finitude of life or mortality. Despite being inscribed in all Scriptures that death is an eventual inevitability, there has never been one that is considered meritorious especially by the bereaved. Last Friday was the first anniversary of the passing on of our Former President, H.E. Benjamin Mkapa. Though one year may seem long enough for one to have let bygones be bygones and brook with God's handiwork, memories are as fresh as yesterday about the fateful Thursday night of July 23rd last year. It started with a call from one of my colleagues from outside the country, who wanted my confirmation of the news that *Mzee* Mkapa is no more. With the hogwash that characterizes social networks these days, buttressed by the fact that I had just arrived home from the hospital where I was with him seemingly "full of life", my impulsive reaction was to dismiss the news as gossip mongering.

No sooner had I hang up than I received another call from my subordinate who, in a saturnine tone, exhorted me to immediately rush back to the hospital for there was "a matter that needed my urgent attention". An almost intuitive circumspection after the two calls prompted me to conclude that something out of the ordinary is unfolding. I rushed to the hospital only to meet the excruciating reality that we are indeed bereft of our iconic leader. I went directly to his room and asked for five minutes with him in solitude to pay my respect, say my final prayers and undertake an ultimate reflection on our interactions that spanned years. From that moment when I stood before his lifeless body to date, I have been taking turns to reflect on what an encounter this has been, and what lessons have there been for me as an individual, a civil servant, a family man, and, God willing of course, a future leader. I can assure you there are too aplenty to be squeezed in this short anniversarial eulogy.

Let me start with rather bold claim that anyone who has ever worked close enough with him will concur with me that you cannot begin to rightly describe *Mzee* Mkapa with anything other than his veritable devoutness to his religion and his obsequiousness to the teachings of Roman Catholic. Having watched him from afar when he was President, and subsequently came in his circle after his retirement, I came to realize that, his apparent authoritative persona, accentuated by his

remarkably husky voice, seemingly creates an amazing façade for his humbleness, humility, demureness and down-to-earthness that characterizes his individuality. As I stood praying before his remains recalling his insistence on making his fleeting presence meaningful to his life in the hereafter and to others that he will leave in the world; and, as a Muslim, I immediately remembered the teachings of my own scripture, the Quran in Chapter 57 (*Al Hadid*), Verse 20 that says, “The life in this world is nothing but an illusion”. It was the first verse to register in my subconscious mind as I stood there before my erstwhile boss and a mentor who, just a short while ago, was oozing authority and confidence. I reminisced his daily sermons on the imperative of avoiding the delirium of power and haughtiness, and embracing the modest approach to life as *sine qua nons* for successful leadership in the public domain. He was faithful to that mission, and even in his autobiography, he characteristically avoided a self-serving verdict on his accomplishments, and chose to leave it to “God and *us* to decide what difference *he has* made in this world”.

As we commemorate one year, one of his personal attributes that I have grown to fully appreciate, and especially after his passing on, is the breadth and width of his technocratic impulses. It is this time of reflections that I have learnt the enormity of the generations-transcending legacy that he has left in the form of institutions of governance in this country. Few, if any, would dispute the fact that, as a result of the numerous reform programs he presided over during his tenure, he had his hand in either the establishment or reorganization of almost all the institutions of governance that we have today. This is not to mention the programs like MKUKUTA on Growth and Reduction of Income, Improvement of Quality of Life and Social Well-Being as well as improving Governance and Accountability; MKUTABITA on formalization of the assets of the poor of and strengthening of the rule of law; MEM and MES on the Reform of Primary and Secondary education respectively. I do not want to enlist Vision 2025, which we are implementing today.

Mzee Mkapa was a sober politician who was fully aware of the ubiquitousness of politics in the governance of any country like ours and the corollaries of its omnipresence. Cognizant of this professed intrusive potential of politics in governance, he embarked on establishing institutions left, right and center with the underpinning belief that having “strong” institutions that are able to carry out their mission without fear of undue political influence is the only way to ensure that they can assert their independence and “push back” when politics intrudes. Also strong institutions, he

believed, can serve as a brake on the political passions and influence that may otherwise be overwhelming.

Mzee Mkapa's unflinching belief on self-reliance is another admirable trait adorning his personality. It is no-brainer that this propensity to self-development draws inspiration from *Mwalimu* having worked closely for him for years. He believed that true development is self-development, and he lived this mantra. This was in full display no sooner than he assumed office when he was met with large fiscal deficits from lack of appropriate expenditure control and inadequate tax administration. In the preceding phase, the worsening macroeconomic situation had led to suspension of balance of payments assistance from the World Bank and the IMF, as well as from several bilateral donors. International reserves had dwindled to 1.5 months of imports of goods and nonfactor services. Credit to his deeply embedded self-development persona, his first instinctive move was to establish an effective revenue collection entity and the Tanzania Revenue Authority (TRA) was conceived. However, the revenue collection drive in itself was not enough as external debt then stood at around US \$8 billion and the debt service ratio (as a percentage of revenue from goods and services) was about 35 percent, compared to the acceptable range for countries in the Highly-Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative of 20-25 percent. That state of affairs entailing an existing debt stock and service requirements that, as he was then quoted telling the UN General Assembly meeting in New York in September 1999, deemed "impossible to attain the goal of eradicating poverty and accelerating the development process". He, as a consequence of that realization, embarked on a crusade to rump up support for Tanzania's Multilateral Debt Relief Fund (MDF), through which, he planned to direct savings on debt servicing to poverty reducing activities in education, health and water services.

As someone who worked closely with him in his final days, I find solace on the fact that while at the rhetorical level he was unambiguous in his disdain of the "dependence syndrome" that afflicts African idiosyncrasy, his actions while in power were very much in consonance with that stance. Much to his credit, the World Bank subsequently endorsed Tanzania's admission to the HIPC's (Heavily-Indebted Poor Countries) initiative and became the first African country to qualify for debt relief. This milestone freed significant resources that went to finance subsequent poverty reduction strategies.

As an economist myself, I can highlight some of the immediate economic successes under his stewardship. His implementation of strong macroeconomic policies at the time when the overall performance was adversely influenced by climatic conditions as drought affected most crops and led to electricity load-shedding and declines in industrial production around 1996/97 (July–June) was bold and commendable. The drought was followed by heavy El Niño rains in early 1998 that seriously damaged the transportation infrastructure as well as some crops, and at end-1998, less than normal rainfall led to regional food shortages and additional food imports. Despite these setbacks, real GDP per capita continued to increase while inflation declined up to 7.7 percent in June 1999 from 27.4 percent when he took office; the lowest rate in more than 25 years. The key to all these strides was fiscal consolidation, where he implemented a cash control system that limited expenditures to available revenues, even when the revenues were adversely affected by the vagaries of nature that I alluded to earlier. There are a lot more I could say, but suffice it to say that his legacy is very apparent as the relics of his brief stint in the leadership of this country are all over for those with objective minds to discern and eyes to see.

While his background in Foreign Service instilled in him deep veneration for multilateral diplomacy and globalism. To me, I found him more pan-Africanist than a globalist in the developmental sense. He pegged firm belief on regional integration as a viable pathway for developing nations to achieve sustainable development. He had twinges of disquiet with the *raison d'être* of some of these multilateral institutions for their being either antithetical or even inimical to the development aspirations and point of views of developing nations. To that end, he viewed the existing global paradigm as consisting of an institutional framework that African countries will almost always find difficult to subscribe to them with their dignity and honor remaining intact. He wanted developing countries to put our acts together to bolster cooperation amongst ourselves to nurture the requisite technical wherewithal first before we can effectively compete in the global market. It is for this belief that we have today the East African Community to show for when he, alongside Presidents Moi and Museveni of the Republics of Kenya and Uganda respectively, worked painstakingly worked to revive it. His penchant for independence and dignity was in full display yet again when, during his chairmanship of the SADC (the then SADCC), after being dismayed by the lack of its own building to host what he considered too august an institution to be headquartered in a rented premises; he went on to mobilize his colleagues to raise resources to construct their own premises in Gaborone where the community is headquartered today.

Having said all that, many will agree with me that given the length of his life, that surpassed even the biblical proclamation of seventy years, the assortments of his accomplishments both personally and otherwise; the reverence that he enjoyed from scores of people from all walks of life; and looking at the institutional legacy that he left in which we are living in; it will be condescending to designate him with any lesser status than a national icon whose career life was completely detached from tawdry affairs of lesser men. In myriad of ways, *Mzee* Mkapa has undoubtedly touched lives of many people in his individual as well as political capacities, and everyone may tell the story in a manner befitting to him or her. But for those of us, who have had the immense privilege and honor to have worked for and with him, can bear witness to how masterful a mentor he was. Working under him, I was able to grow professionally, intellectually and personally under his mighty knowledge-infusing wings. I can only remember the experience with nostalgia and thank God for what to me remains the most eye-opening and intellectually-enriching encounter of my life so far.

While we thank God for the life of this quintessential patriot and one of the greatest sons of our nation, we pray that *Mzee* Mkapa's soul continue to rest in eternal peace. AMEN

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