



George Floyd, Bad Governance, and the Silent Violations of African Human Rights

By Tata Emmanuel Sunjo | Opinion

Abstract

In 2020, George Floyd – a Black man in the United States – was brutally killed by a white police officer. The world was unequivocal in denouncing such an outrageous act, but Black people living in Sub-Saharan Africa continue to face multiple right violations. This can be attributed to fundamental governance crevices associated with poor leadership that characterise

many of these African states. This article outlines a number of examples of the incessant suppression of the socio-economic, civil, political, and overall human rights of Africans in the face of dictatorship, anarchy, and bad governance. The clamour for good governance on the continent is critical for upholding the dignity of Black African lives.

Overview

While the world is still struggling to fully grasp the agonising socio-economic and political ramifications brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, the recent killing of George Floyd, a Black man, in the United States of America on 25 May 2020 portrays one of the most despicable human rights violations in modern times, especially in a country that parades itself as the bastion and champion of democracy and good governance. What irony! According to The New York Times, the killing came after 'Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, after a convenience store employee called 911 and told the police that Mr. Floyd had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit \$20 bill' (Hill et al., 2020). The criminal investigation showed that the police officer, Mr. Derek Chauvin, kept his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for eight minutes and 46 seconds despite the fact that he had lost consciousness and showed no sign of life one minute after paramedics arrived at the scene. The police officers were fired a day after Floyd's arrest and death.

Undoubtedly, this heinous act in the 21st century clearly serves as a conspicuous vista of complex and deeply engrained racial and structural inequalities and discriminations. It is also a direct and outrageous peril to the existence of the Black race in particular and the human race as a whole if humanity does not, as one, stand up to massively promote and protect universal human rights and freedoms, as enshrined in the 1948 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights which are domesticated in various continental, regional, and national platforms.

Reflections on Floyd's Death and African Human Rights Records

The killing of Floyd has been received with outrage and protests across the world. However, citizens and leaders from Africa – the cradle of humanity and a continent predominantly inhabited by Black people – have expressed relatively few concerns on the continuation of Black discrimination and inhumane treatment.

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socio-economic, civil, political, and overall human rights of Africans in the face of dictatorship, anarchy, and bad governance. In other words, if leaders dare talk about Black Lives Matter in this context, they will be deluged with questions about the lives of their own populace, which are being lost on a daily basis due to poverty and underdevelopment, unemployment, chaotic healthcare systems, lack of quality education, limited rule of law, conflicts of all dimensions, gender and other inequalities, and many other vices. Certainly, George Floyd's repeated cry of 'I can't breathe' when Derek Chauvin, aided by three other police officers, knelt on his neck for almost nine minutes, is just a glimpse of the pains, torments, tortures, and premature deaths that Africans have gone through and continue to go through as a result of bad political leadership.

Yet, these do not capture global empathy due to restrictions on press freedoms, as well as on freedoms of assembly and peaceful protests, even though these are clearly provided for in many African countries' constitutions. Indeed, Amnesty International reported in 2019 that Africa was 'marked by widespread repression of dissent – including crackdowns on peaceful protests, and attacks on media, human rights defenders and political opponents. In over 20 countries, people were denied their rights to peaceful protest, including through unlawful bans, use of excessive force, harassment and arbitrary arrests' (2019: 5).

In 2020, in the wake of enforcing sweeping restrictions on movement to fight the Covid-19 pandemic, more than half of the 54 African countries – including Burundi, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zimbabwe – had not pretended to register their names in records of rights violations of their populations, ranging from torture, to arbitrary arrests, to extra-judicial killings. In the case of Nigeria, for example, before 20 April 2020, at least 18 people had been killed by security forces while implementing the country's draconian Covid-19 lockdown measures, at times preventing the population from accessing even basic necessities. Ironically, at the time, the number of contagions from the virus had not reached the number killed in the process of implementing lockdown.

Despite being overwhelmingly blessed with stupendous natural resources, Africans have continued to live degrading lives. Before the majority of African countries gained independence in the second half of the 20th century, most of the blame for the continent's underdevelopment was attributed to the cruel slave trades and to European colonialism. However, even though a multiplicity of factors account for the continent's backwardness more than 50 years since independence, leadership inadequacies in many African countries are to be held responsible for the failure to generate an economic miracle on the continent similar to that of the East Asian tiger economies in the second half of the last century.

It is indeed horrendous that the majority of Africans who dominate the Black populations both on the continent and in the diaspora continue to live at the margins of a civilisation which commenced on African soil. This situation is largely attributed to systemic structural problems which are a function of poor-quality leadership. In much the same way that Floyd cried out 'I can't breathe' to the police officers and finally died, bad governance in Africa has for a long time created similar scenarios for Africans. Thus, bad governance and its adverse human rights effects in Africa, with the complementarity of external factors, is very reminiscent of Derek Chauvin's kneeling on George Floyd's neck, aided by three other then-police officers. Drawing from this analogy, therefore, a number of pains, tortures, and deaths on the continent can be inferred as follows:

1. It is bad governance that makes Africans continue to cry out: 'I can't survive unless I engage in a suicidal journey to Europe' through the dangerous and deadly Mediterranean waters. Even though the number of migrant deaths has significantly declined due to relentless efforts headed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 1,283 deaths were still recorded in 2019 through the three main Mediterranean Sea routes, adding to the 19,164 migrant lives lost since 2014 (IOM, 2019).
2. It is bad governance, typically represented by weak and biased judicial systems, as well as limited respect for the rule of law, that has resulted in extrajudicial killings, targeted killings, summary execution, and the non-guarantee of a fair trial to all Africans – especially those who are political opponents. This is well-captured in the 2019 Amnesty International Report, which accuses a number of African governments, characterised by rising insecurity, of using state security forces to commit human rights violations such as extra-judicial killings, enforced disappearances, and torture (Amnesty International, 2019).
3. It is bad governance that has promoted massive squandermania and jaw-dropping bribery and corrupt practices, leading to the deepening of poverty and inequalities and the loss of many African lives. The 2019 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report reiterates that 20–30% of investments in publicly funded construction projects may be lost because of mismanagement and bribery (OECD, 2019: 17). In 2016, The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) observed that corruption is certainly one of the major obstacles to structural transformation in Africa. In this report, corruption on the continent is attributed to three main factors: the level of institutional weaknesses which provide the basis for political leaders and public servants to misuse national resources and abuse power without being checked; the continued decline in the standards of public servants associated with poor incentives; and the blind eye often turned to corruption by Western countries (UNECA, 2016).
4. It is bad governance that has failed to tackle infectious and non-communicable diseases that continue to claim thousands of African

lives due to limited medical research and poor healthcare systems. While other regions of the world have made significant strides in improving their healthcare systems, nutrition, drinking water, and sanitation – which all contribute enormously to reducing mortality rates and raising life expectancy – the Atlas on Regional Integration in West Africa (2008) observes that Sub-Saharan Africa remains the last world region where mortality rates (particularly child mortality) continue to be high, and life expectancy low (ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD, 2008). According to the World Bank’s 2019 Report, rates of communicable disease morbidity and mortality remain stubbornly high due to a combination of factors, key of which is weak healthcare systems. The poor development of healthcare systems is attributed to the general lack of political will of the continent’s leadership, complemented with the illicit financial flows of money from bribery and corruption. This explains why most of the continent’s political elite quickly rush to hospitals in developed countries with well-developed systems for medical attention, while the majority of their citizens are victims of the disease burden.

5. It is bad governance, represented by Derek Chauvin’s kneeling on Floyd’s neck, that is responsible for the lack of basic, yet critical, infrastructures of water and sanitation, energy, housing, and education that increases the vulnerability of African populations to premature deaths. While some gains have been made largely through the efforts of UN and international development partners, the gap on accessing these critical amenities still remains wide. For instance, in one of its briefing documents, the German development agency GIZ states that: ‘Only 56% of city-dwellers have access to piped water, down from 67% in 2003, and just 11% to a sewer connection’ (2019: 10). This situation could become more precarious due to other factors, such as growing population, pollution, and climate change. Inadequacies in providing amenities such as water expose the population to dire hygiene and sanitation situations, water-related diseases, and gender-based violence against women and girls who have to search for potable water.

6. It is bad governance that has created deep

divisions among and between African sons and daughters over political, social, cultural, and natural resources issues – giving rise to complex conflicts and growing insecurity which continue to result in more deaths, forced movements, and rising poverty and disillusionment. A 2017 Oxfam Report noted that data on conflict fatalities in Africa are scarce and inconsistent. However, most of the recorded deaths in conflict and security-challenged environments are caused by uncontrolled arms. The report notes that millions of lives were lost as a direct result of wars in Africa (Adeniyi, 2017). While state-based conflicts have significantly reduced over the years due to advances in clearly defining states’ geographical boundaries and growing multilateral cooperation, non-state and one-sided conflicts still remain a serious concern on the continent due to a combination of factors linked to poor governance, election rigging, discrimination against minorities, and growing fundamentalism among others. The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) has indicated that: ‘Conflict in Africa is becoming more complex as the numbers of conflict actors have increased. Rebel (and extremist) groups are more numerous and often fracture into additional groupings’ (Cilliers, 2018: 3).

Conclusion

We could go on and on to demonstrate the systemic human rights issues fundamentally caused by bad governance on the continent, which all demand the democratisation of advocacy through peaceful civil protests, as guaranteed in most African countries’ constitutions. While the massive and largely peaceful protests in the US and around the globe in response to Floyd’s death advocated for serious structural reforms, African countries in particular require fundamental institutional reforms that will address governance crevices in a bid to propel and sustain socio-economic developments that will improve human dignity in general and Black African lives in particular. Achieving this will not only halt the brain drain on the continent, but will create a conducive and receptive ground for diasporic Africans and other global citizens to feel that they can come back to Africa and lead rewarding lives, as they would elsewhere in the world.

Without these reforms, the 2030 Sustainable

Development Goals and the African Union's Agenda 2063 will all remain nebulous ventures. As a continent with independent states strongly wedded to the doctrine of state sovereignty and territorial integrity, addressing governance issues domestically seems to be yielding insignificant results at a very slow pace. Thus, the task of pressuring for the effective and swift implementation of these reforms lies with the global political leadership spearheaded by the UN and her partners, as well as with continental and regional organisations.

The guarantee of civil and political rights for African citizens is equally critical in advocating for these structural reforms to be made to pave the way for good governance and sustainable development. Just as there are growing debates and efforts to mitigate systemic and institutionalised racism in some Western countries, African countries must work to eradicate systemic bad governance practices which are responsible for defacing the value of Black lives on the continent. In other words, unless the continent's political leadership gives dignity to the lives of their citizenry, it will be difficult for that dignity to be accorded freely to Black people in other parts of the world. This is possible and will go further to lay bare the barren argument of the superiority of some races over others. Throughout the history of human civilisation, cases abound where significant strides have been made by people of all races in areas of peace and security, science and technology, arts and culture, and all facets of human society. To complement good governance efforts, the collective action of people from all races to give dignity to human life is equally critical to end the pervasive and, in many cases, gruesome human rights violations occurring in many countries today. This can only be guaranteed by enhancing good governance practices across the continent.

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