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Recent developments in North Africa; impact on the Arab world, Africa and the world at large, lessons learned

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SPEECH BY H.E. AMANI ABEID KARUME FORMER PRESIDENT OF ZANZIBAR ON
RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN NORTH AFRICA; IMPACT ON THE ARAB WORLD, AFRICA AND THE WORLD AT LARGE, LESSONS LEARNED
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1. INTRODUCTION:
Dean Thacker,
Dr. Linda Heywood,
Boston University dignitaries,
Ambassador Charles Stith,
Invited guests,
Distinguished participants,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good evening,
It is a great honour for me to be in the midst of this learned congregation of the world renowned Boston University. I am indeed much more honoured to have been invited through the African Presidential Lecture Series as the eighth former President from an African country to come to this university to share the experiences of our countries and our experiences with important global issues.

The topic on which I have been requested to speak is a very challenging one. The subject of the matter is still raw and things are still unfolding. To attempt to speak on such a subject risks
many errors, but errors are what we are supposed to make in order to learn.
Dean Thacker,

In 1988, a famous Arabian figure and scholar wrote the following, “When the instruments of government are based on dictatorship, the society has no alternative means of self-expression and hence to rectify the situation other than through violence, it remains with no other options but to rise in revolt.”

Within a span of a month, two North African Regimes, in Arab Muslim states crushed one after another beginning with Zine el-Abidine Ben-Ali of Tunisia on the 14th January, 2011 and followed by strongman Hosni Mubarak of Egypt on the 18th February 2011.

Youth demonstrations, moving like the waves of a Tsunami, were picking up in momentum and strength day after day until they crushed on the walls of Presidential mansions forcing its occupants to flee. The magnitudes of the events, the swiftness, and their likely domino effects have shocked not only political observers but also leaders in the Western and the rest of the World. The immediate impact of the events has started to be felt in significant ways in Yemen, Algeria, Lebanon and Bahrain where its people are rising against their regimes. The worst scenario is happening in Libya where mass uprisings against the regime of Muamar Gaddafi are threatening to become total civil war between supporters of the uprising and the pro-Gaddafi forces.
While shocked, the Western World has been forced to re-think their policies with regard to such and possible similar situations.

In this lecture presentation I will attempt briefly to look at the sequence of events that took place in both Tunisia and Egypt to the fall of the regimes and how its tremors have been felt as far as Yemen, Algeria, Lebanon, Libya and Bahrain. I shall explore the causes for the popular Revolutions, and the similarity in the two fallen regimes. External factors if any will be examined. Possible impact on other North African, Arab and other African States shall be explored and not forgetting impact on the rest of world.

The lecture will attempt to make a conclusion on the prerequisite for future stability not only in Tunisia and Egypt, but for the rest of North African, Arab and other African states. The basis of stable future relationships with Western World will be touched upon while closing these lecture remarks.

2. THE ADVENT OF THE POPULAR UPRISING
The recent political upheaval in North Africa began in Tunisia in early January following an act of self immolation of a young man, Mohammed Bonaziz, age 26, who set himself alight in front of the police headquarters due to unbearable humiliation in the hands of police brutality. The incidence outraged the people sparking and unleashing a wave of protests and demonstrations against the Regime of Zine-El-Abedine. The incidence unearthed long simmering discontents towards the oppressive regimes. The demonstrators demanded political freedom, employment opportunities, dissolution of the parliament and removal of Ben Ali.
from the reign of power. Ten days after the death of Mohamed Bonaziz, on the 14th of July Ben Ali had fallen fleeing to Saudi Arabia with billions of US dollars, tons of gold and other valuables.

The Tunisian uprising, popularly known as the Jasmine Revolution, was unleashed by the youths who grew tired of 15 years of political repression, autocratic rule, and absence of viable economic opportunities to be employed or to engage in self-employment, and decided to revolt regardless of consequences. The people had spoken and people’s power triumphed.

The Jasmine Revolution has been carried out through people’s determination to end autocracy without having any specific political agenda nor a backing of a strong political party or Islamic leadership groups. The people simply wanted to live better and have a say on the course of their lives.

On the 25th of January, tens of thousands of Egyptians turned up in the streets of Cairo, Alexandria and Suez in a peaceful demonstration of civil protest calling for an end to the 30 years long regime of Hosni Mubarak. The events surrounding the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia that ousted the reign of Ben Ali ten days before that was fully covered by the media. (Al-Jazeera and CNN) It gave the people of Egypt confidence that they could bring down Mubarak through a show of popular solidarity against evil and injustice.
The pro-democracy demonstrations can be credited to the mobilization work done by the social networks through Twitter network and facebook page founded on the 6th April 2008 recruiting more than 70,000 supporters who vowed to join the march in support of the campaign to bring down the reign of Hosni Mubarak.

In Egypt, like it was in Tunisia, it was the youths who led the demonstrations. The youths in tens of thousands having nothing to lose flocked the streets toward the liberation square where at its height more than 50,000 protesters occupied the square chanting slogans calling for an end to emergency laws that outlasted the Mubarak reign, demanding the dissolution of the Government, demanding better economic opportunities and above all demanding the resignation of Hosni Mubarak from the leadership of the most populous and seemingly stable Arab country.

The uprising that was initially scattered in the urban centers of Cairo and Alexandria, grew into an unprecedented scale, becoming the largest public demonstrations in Egypt since the 1977 bread riots, drawing people from all walks of life, and culminating in the famous “March of One Million People” on February the first.

While Mubarak on the 1st of February acceded to a few demands including not standing for re-election during the coming September general election, delegating some of his powers and dissolving his entire cabinet, on the 10th of February, made another statement totally refusing to relinquish power and step down, just to bow-down eight days later when he left the reigns of power in disbelief.
A joint high military command has now taken power to guide the transition to a democratically elected government. You don’t need modern military machines to bring down governments these days.

Such were the events in brief as they unfolded, which have been well documented day after day, hour after hour, and minute after minute by the media and other observers. The bravery shown by the demonstrators is unprecedented in the history of the two North African States albeit the heavy hand of the police that caused to approximately 300 deaths and thousands of injured needing emergency treatment. The Regimes have fallen, but what were the underlying causes that sparked the Revolutions?

3. CAUSES FOR THE REVOLUTION
The Revolutions both in Tunisia and Egypt had their seeds planted during the past two to three decades. There is a likeness of circumstances surrounding the two regimes. Both leaders had over stayed in power causing resentments from their people. In power for over two decades, exactly 30 years for Hosni Mubarak and about 23 years for Ben Ali they had no new ideas for the betterment and welfare of their people and country and they remained with zeal for wealth accumulation. Mubarak’s wealth is estimated to be between US$40-70 billion, that is a part from the wealth of members of his family, close relatives and associates in power. Ben Ali’s wife is said to have left with a ton and a half of gold. All this looting left their people very poor.
To be able to cling to power for such lengths of time, demanded the kind of autocracy and heavy handedness that would crush any sign of dissent. The machinery of the police, internal security and the military was there to ensure that the people were quieted and quelled. To legalize the acts of the terror machinery, the two countries unleashed states of emergency that lasted for over 30 years in Egypt and about 19 years in Tunisia. Through the emergency laws, democratic institutions were suppressed, human rights abused and the judiciary was but a mockery of justice. No really free and fair elections were held in these countries for the span of the dictators’ rule. During Mubarak’s reign four shady elections were held in which the ruling party won more than 90 percent of the parliamentary seats. All opposition was crushed in the name of fighting Islamic fundamentalism or Muslim Brotherhood.

The state machinery was run in a bureaucratic way full of nepotism and corruption. An individual with no connection in the helms of the Government could not be expected to have his rights.

Another feature of the two nations is the youthfullness of their population structure. About a third of the two countries’ populations are below thirty years. Most of the youths in Egypt had not experienced any other rule apart from that of Mubarak. Because the system never bothered for its people’s welfare, rampant unemployment persisted, seriously affecting the youth population. The youths who were educated but had no viable economic engagements became a bastion for revolt. Life remained tough for the youths and a bigger part of the population. High
costs of living afflicted the majority of the population both in Egypt and Tunisia. Unemployment in Egypt stood at 14 percent, that is 12 million people in the able working population without jobs. About 90 percent of that figure, 10.8 million are under the age of 30 years old. Inflation is standing in double digits. Inflation was at 20 percent in 2008 declining to 11 percent in 2010. Food inflation stood at 17 percent. With half of the Egyptian population under the age of 24, and high rates of unemployment, schools and universities ____ (?) ____ have little to look forward to but taking their place in the unemployment line.

Given the above enumerated circumstances, the environment in the two countries was ripe for change, ready for a revolution, ready to take advantage of any available change in circumstances.

4. CONTRIBUTION OF EXTERNAL FACTORS
While the seeds for Revolution were planted within the two countries, there are a number of external factors that significantly contributed to the outcomes.

The two countries were good allies of the Western World, especially the United States of America. The two regimes were considered to be the stabilizing factors against Islamic fundamentalism represented by Muslim Brotherhood and Al-qaida. With the assistance of the west, these organizations have been
brutally suppressed and outlawed. The western world has been more concerned with stability in the Middle-East to ensure a constant flow of oil without disruption and concern for the security of Israel to the point of forgetting the principles under which their own countries are built upon. The US through five Presidents had considered Egypt under Mubarak as its strongest ally in the Middle East. It is estimated that over the last 30 years the USA had provided Egypt with over US$600 billion in Aid. The Egyptian half a million soldiers military apparatus is American trained and equipped. In return Egypt has acted as a shield against Iranian radicalism, Hamas, and other Muslim fundamentalists. Egypt on its part also entered in to peace agreements with Israel including the Camp David Accord nurtured by the United States.

Obsessed with such stability the US, the west in general could not contemplate an Egypt without Mubarak, even after the mass demonstrations had erupted. They simply urged Mubarak to undertake certain reforms to calm down the uprising. Unfortunately, the realization came too late; the West had not read the signs of time and the need for change. Both Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak are gone. The impact of the three weeks long Revolution can be felt far from the borders of those two countries.

*Another important fact that natured the revolution is the high literacy of these countries’ youths, compared to African countries south of the Sahara. Access to the internet/web facilitated quick exchanges of information. The youth were mobilized through Facebook and Twitter and their messages went worldwide instantly.
5. IMPACT ON OTHER NORTH AFRICAN AND ARAB STATES

Before the ashes of the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia had settled down, its impact had already been felt in a number of other countries such as Algeria, Yemen, Lebanon, Libya and Bahrain. In Sanaa, the capital of Yemen, about 10,000 demonstrators went to the streets demanding the removal of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. The uprising were also youth led and supported by thirty five percent of the labour force which is unemployed. The Ali Abdullah reign is also considered by the west as a contending force against Al-qaida.

In the same vein, the winds of change are blowing across the North African and Arab countries. The youths are discontented with unemployment, corrupt government and suppression of freedom. Following the fall of Mubarak, unorganized youths went to the streets in jubilation calling for an end to the regimes in their countries. They have, however, been met by a strong military force with which they fought and are continuing fight. In Libya and Bahrain things are taking the same course of mass resistance. The armed forces in these two countries have reacted harshly with no restrain, killing scores of demonstrators in cold blood. The mass killings however have not calmed the wind of change. Iran is also not at peace. Things can no longer be at ease in the North African and the Arab world.
A part from the political and social unrest, the affected countries have suffered a lot in terms of economic loss. Economic systems have been disrupted; banks closed for many days, high tourist outflows from these countries and cancellation of hotel bookings resulting into a multiplier of losses. Unemployment rates are high, shortages of supplies is acute leading to high cost of living especially for the common people.

6. IMPACT ON OTHER AFRICAN STATES

The aftermath of the North African popular uprising may not have immediate direct impact on African states. But the environment that brewed the events in Egypt and Tunisia do openly exist in many of the African states. These societies are young with most of its youth being not gainfully employed. Nepotism and corruption is heavily in existence. The process of democratization is going on very slowly. Many of the reigning political parties are autocratic and resistant to change. Sporadic eruptions in East Africa, near civil war situations in some west and central African States, indicate that the people are no longer ready to accept passivity as a way of life.

7. IMPACT TO THE WEST
The fallen regimes and many of those in trouble apart from Libya and Iran are close allies of western democracies. These regimes have been financially and militarily supported by western countries. The west has not been blind to the atrocities of these regimes but intentionally oblivious. Too long the shaky stability was accepted so long as the boss’ luggage reached its destination.

The direct impact to the west shall be known in months to come. But the immediate impact relates to uncertainly over the control of the military hardware supplied to these regimes lest they are turned against their benefactors. In security over the oil and petroleum products supply lines is another concern of the west. Continued instability in the turmoil region threatens the economic stability of the west. It is in the interest of the west for things to calm down.

8. CONCLUSION
The pre-requisite for stability is true democracy. Mutual interest of the west and those of the North African, African and Arab World, can be optimized if a system that insures inclusiveness of all interest groups in the affected countries, is instituted. It should noted, however, that mere elections or democracy will not create jobs nor bring food and other necessities of life. The west, in collaboration with newly democratically elected regimes in their countries, has a big role and capability to assist in the realization of this noble goal of job creation and food provision. A democratic and free society where the rule of law is strictly observed will assure opportunities for all. The people of these countries are not anti-west, but the system can drive them there.
In the meantime, the west has to come out in full force to work together with the new regimes and those which have remained, in formulation of a Marshall plan for economic and political stabilization of the affected regions. Any programme that shall be implemented should necessarily help to create jobs, better social services, eliminate corruption, and generally optimize the virtues of good governance.

For the rest of African countries the west should openly stand for true democracy and stop supporting autocratic regimes for short term gains. Stable democratic regimes that have the mandate of the people to govern will optimize the interests of their people and those of the western world.

The future engagement of the west with Arab, Muslim and African countries could be better directed at building sustainable democratic governing institutions and their capacities for economic growth and development such that wider opportunities shall be availed leading to higher welfares for the people.

Many of the African countries south of the Sahara have good and functioning development programs that have been crafted in collaboration with multilateral institutions like the U.N., World Bank, IMF and UNDP, to mention a few, and bilateral agencies such as USAID, DFID of the UK and the EU. Programs such as poverty reductions strategies, if well implemented, will result both in growth and development. The west needs to help hold the regimes in African Countries accountable for the implementation
of such programs. The west should help in building accountable and transparent governing institutions in Africa.

It is my hope that this short presentation will have contributed to the understanding of the genesis of the recent uprisings in North Africa and in the Arab world. Given the impact and the reaction to the events of the region, Africa and the world may have to be looked at in a long term perspective rather than be guided by short term national interests. The uprisings have not been and are not based on any ideological grounds. The people’s anger has been building over decades. The main causes we have shown are economy based: the poverty, the deprivation, lack of opportunities, social and political exclusion. These are areas that need immediate attention from within and with the support of the international community.

Your Excellencies, members of the audience, let me reiterate that is has been a great honour for me to have been given the opportunity to share my views with you.

Thank you for you attention.