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Epilogue: Democracy in Ghana as a Model for the African Continent¹

H. E. John Dramani Mahama
President of the Republic of Ghana

It is a humbling moment for me to address this gathering today on the role of democratic governance and sustainable economic development in Ghana, as the country continues to distinguish itself as a model for the continent.

I salute the rich history of this great University as well as its sustained effort in pushing the edges and consolidating the liberal values of American society.

I appreciate this opportunity to interact with you today on how we can enhance our collaboration to improve our governance systems, consolidate fundamental principles of personal empowerment and to meet our economic objectives.

The Africa we all knew no longer exists, and in the next half hour I will explain the current opportunities on the continent and the new policy directions that are implied by them.

Earlier this year, we celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the African Union. In Addis Ababa, we spent just a few hours celebrating. The rest of the time, we assessed the opportunities and challenges for Africa in the next 50 years and the plans that we must, together, agree on and implement in order for Africa to claim the future. This is the only way Africa can redeem its past and forge a peaceful and prosperous future for its people.

For far too long, Africa has been discussed in both academic and policy discourses with pity and extreme pessimism. There is an obvious need to recalibrate the global narrative about Africa, especially in the context of the many positive developments and the enormous potential of the region going forward.

This narrative of pity has been instrumental in shaping the policies and tactics of international development assistance, including of NGOs tapping into the generosity of individuals who make charitable donations.

¹ Address by the President of Ghana, His Excellency John Dramani Mahama, to mark the formal end of Kennesaw State University's "Year of Ghana" celebrations and academic programs.

That industry has for decades spawned an international marketing ploy embedded with the most negative popular representational images of Africa, designed to raise billions of dollars ostensibly in aid for a dying continent.

It is time to reverse that narrative using the platforms we just used in New York during the UN General Assembly debates and this platform here at Kennesaw.

As we make interlocutors like you intimately familiar with the fast-paced changes occurring in Africa, we calmly but effectively undo the widely accepted representation of Africa as the Dark Continent.

Yes, Africa is a dark continent, but it is dark only in terms of the deliberate absence of illumination, an illumination that will portray to the rest of the world a continent rich, virgin, budding, peaceful, friendly, continuously learning, ready to do business.

The thrust of my message appears to ignore the vivid and scripted images of ethnic conflict, political instability, dictatorial governments, a region lacking economic opportunities, with high levels of abject poverty, and where millions die of HIV/AIDS.

Commenting on this pessimistic view of Africa in the 1980s, Professor Ali Mazrui, one of Africa's finest academics said, "Africa is the first habitat of man but it is the last to be made habitable; Africans are not just the most brutalized of all people but probably the most humiliated in modern history; African societies are not the closest to the West culturally but have been experiencing the most rapid pace of westernization; Africa is not the poorest of all regions of the world in terms of resources but it is the least developed . . ."

In that Africa of the 1980s it was projected that the number of Africans living in abject poverty will increase into the distant future rather than decrease, as the HIV/AIDS pandemic also exerted pressure on government resources. This was the Africa of the last century.

That period included what was generally described in development discourse as the "*lost decade of Africa*." My first book, titled *My First Coup D'état*, is centered on stories from that lost decade to Africa.

The African story is partly a story of frozen narratives. We must be careful to undo the freezing in time of the narrative of the "*lost decade*." Africa is currently undergoing tremendous transformation, but its success stories are suffocated by two mutually reinforcing factors: growing and powerful special interests in the poverty industry; and a growing international media environment that prioritizes negativity in Africa over everything else on the continent.

As a historian, I am intimately aware of the capacity of historical narratives to define or redefine, imprison or liberate a continent and its people. We must begin the project of scripting a true narrative of Africa that is liberating and progressive.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Africa you should know about is the Africa, which has since the year 2000 witnessed increases in GDP from 15.9% to over 22% last year.

It is the Africa, which barely two years ago, received its largest ever share of global direct foreign investment amounting to some \$80 billion. It is the Africa where such investment is projected to double from the 2011 figure by 2015, barely two years from now.

Three years ago, 10 of the 15 fastest growing economies in the world were in Africa, and we anticipate that seven out of the world's 10 fastest growing economies in the next five years will be in Africa. Those countries include Ghana. The continent's cumulative GDP of \$1.5 trillion is also projected to double by 2020.

In today's Africa, information technology, especially in the area of telecommunications, has provided the continent an unprecedented opportunity to leapfrog.

I know because I was Minister for Communications. While telephone connectivity in the region was just one-tenth of the global average in the mid-1990s when I was Minister, the sector has witnessed a 20% growth rate.

In Kenya for instance, over 70% of the adult population rely on mobile phone technology for financial services such as money transfers and banking. And a few years ago, Ghana used SMS technology to gather the views of Ghanaians on the gains and deficits in its Constitution and how these may be remedied.

Africa overall has been experiencing a tremendous amount of economic growth and is generally adjudged to be the second fastest growing region in the world in the last decade.

There are strong indications that Africa's GDP will continue to expand as new frontiers of national economies and investment opportunities shift global investment capital in her direction.

Contrary to the "lost decade" view that poverty in Africa will continue to increase, the opposite is the case. Several studies have shown a decline in overall levels and patterns of poverty.

My country, Ghana, was among 10 others from Africa that were honored for achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) target of halving poverty in advance of the MDG target date of 2015.

Although income inequality remains a challenge for most governments in the region, there are indications of a gradual fall in the income inequality gap in more than a dozen countries in the region.

The greatest testimony to the enviable economic future for Africa is this: whilst the world is still recovering from the global economic crisis, African economies have not only been able to withstand financial crisis, but have continued to show robust growth.

High commodity prices, advances in information and communication technology, and diversification of our economies to include growth in the services sector have helped to drive this process.

We recognize that as mineral exports make up roughly half of our continent's exports, we are vulnerable to commodity price shocks.

This vulnerability notwithstanding, Africa will continue to benefit from increasing world demand for the region's natural resources: oil, natural gas, minerals, food, and arable land.

Africa today still has about 10% of the world's oil reserves, and this is likely to increase as more and more countries in the region, like Ghana, discover more oil; 85% of the chromium and platinum group of metals; 40% of the world's gold reserves; and 60% of the world's uncultivated arable land. Our greater challenge is to put in place systems to allow these resources to be used for the benefit of our people.

While most in the world are growing older and pensions systems are being re-structured to accommodate the challenges presented by the graying of the population, Africa's population is relatively young and growing younger.

Our peculiar demographic dynamic presents opportunities. Our advantage lies in an overall youthful population, a rapidly growing workforce, and a declining dependency ratio.

Several studies suggest that about 122 million people will be added to Africa's workforce by 2020, and demographers forecast that by 2035, Africa's combined labor force will be the largest in the world, surpassing those of India and China.

Africa's population also has its urbanization dynamics. There are presently 52 African cities with more than 1 million inhabitants. Recent demographic projections suggest that by 2030, about 50% of Africans will make their dwelling in cities.

In Ghana, 51% of the population already lives in cities or urban areas and earlier this year, I launched Ghana's Urban Policy as a measure to be adequately prepared for the new demographic dynamics.

Currently estimated at over 350 million, Africa's middle class is expected to expand especially as more Africans pursue opportunities in the cities.

The opportunities are tremendous. The growth in a youthful working population with preference for urban dwelling means opportunities for investment in communication technology, energy infrastructure, housing, social security, multi-modal transport networks, quality education, healthcare systems, and the public services.

The opportunities also present spaces for simultaneously pursuing transformation, inclusiveness, freshness, innovation, and creativity in these sectors.

Ladies and gentlemen, the African Renaissance I have just described did not happen by chance.

The tremendous economic growth, spurred by peace and stability, African creativity, unique African hospitality and all the other things you will love when you visit Africa, had a stimulus.

The democratization processes initiated by many African states since the early 1990s instituted rules that made it possible for ordinary Africans to, once again, retain the power to hire and fire their leaders.

With the power of their thumbs, ordinary Africans installed and removed their leaders. The guns and the machetes are fast being retired. In instances like in Mali, where some African countries stray, a collective continental effort has been instituted to bring them back on track. I was proud to join fellow African leaders in Mali the week before last at the investiture of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta.

Across Africa, there is a renewed belief that continuing on the path to accelerated growth requires the normalization of electoral competition. A growing number of Africans have resolved not to allow themselves to be used as instruments of political violence.

More Africans are coming to terms with the fact that it is normal for elections to be vigorously contested, and where votes are fairly recorded, disputes can be resolved by the institutions mandated to do so.

Recent developments in many African countries, including the peaceful resolution by Ghana's Supreme Court of the petition challenging my election as President, are clear signs that both political actors and their followers are converging around the

view that institutions are not only the rules of the game, but also the symbol of our collective confidence.

The trend of peaceful resolution of many presidential election disputes in Africa through legal processes arguably serves to debunk the widely held afro-pessimist notion that democracy cannot thrive on the African continent. It has also re-ignited the discourse on the utility of elections as the only instrument of political change.

Today, the doubts harbored by many at the start of our democratic journey no longer exist, and instead we are viewed with respect and admiration the world over for the able manner in which we have managed our affairs.

But the experience of other African countries in recent times have shown that where external actors interfere too heavily in our democratic processes, especially in elections, there is a greater danger of political upheavals and possibility of civil strife.

Beyond commitments to democratic aspirations at the national levels, one of the key factors driving the positive transformations in Africa is the increasing cooperation among the current generation of leaders in the region. Our forbearers were not any less committed than we are, but we live in an era of globalization.

And like any new generation Africans aspire to do greater than their forebears have done, a new generation of African leaders came together to proclaim an African renaissance resulting in the landmark and far reaching transformations, including continental peer review and oversight.

This courageous move, without a doubt, has given a renewed impetus to our common quest for freedom and prosperity in our continent and has also restored global confidence in our ability to manage our own affairs and to offer African solutions to African problems. Once again, Ghana was the first country to submit itself for peer review.

Ladies and gentlemen, our successes so far can also be attributed to the transformation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to the Africa Union (AU). In the last decade, the AU has become a vibrant organization in the arena of global governance, and its various structures and institutions are taking shape.

We may not have achieved the vision of a continental Union Government, possessing an African High Command, a Central Bank, a common market, and a common monetary policy as originally envisioned.

But we have equally important institutions under the current AU structure including the Peace and Security Council, the New Partnership for African Development, the African Peer Review Mechanism, the Pan-African Parliament, and the African Court on Human and People's Rights.

Together, these institutions and bodies have become the building blocks for a truly strong and vibrant African Union, a Union that is making it possible for Africans to review governance practices in other African countries and proactively recommend changes where necessary.

Ghana is proud of the role we played in African liberation and again proud of the role we are playing in the African Renaissance.

Thank you.

