

Nyerere's nationalist legacy

By ISSA G. SHIVJI

PROFESSOR OF PAN-AFRICAN STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF DAR ES SALAAM



ISSA G. SHIVJI is one of Africa's leading experts on law and development issues, and is Professor of Pan-African Studies at the University of Dar es Salaam. Professor Shivji has served as Advocate of the High Court and the Court of Appeal of Tanzania since 1977 and advocate of the High Court in Zanzibar since 1989. He has taught and worked in universities all over the world. He is a prolific writer and researcher, producing books, monographs and articles.

Mwalimu Julius Kambarage Nyerere was an eminent nationalist of the first generation of African leaders who fought for independence. His nationalism was rooted in Pan-Africanism, transcending territorial, ethnic, or racial nationalisms. His address to celebrate Ghana's 40th year of independence summed up his approach: "For centuries we had been oppressed and humiliated as Africans. We were hunted and enslaved as Africans, and we were colonised as Africans. ... Since we were humiliated as Africans, we had to be liberated as Africans."

Nyerere characterised African countries as artificial entities, *vinchi* (statelets) as he derided them in Kiswahili, carved out by the imperial powers. His clarion call therefore was for African liberation and African unity. Only in this way could the African people overcome both oppression and humiliation. This Pan-Africanist nationalism was expressed in the Arusha Declaration of 1967. Its rallying cry resonated with the African masses throughout the continent: "We have been oppressed, we have been exploited, and we have been disregarded. It is our weakness that has led to our being oppressed, exploited and disregarded. Now we want a revolution – a revolution to end our weakness, so that we are never again exploited, oppressed, or humiliated."

The Caribbean academic, C.L.R. James, described the Arusha Declaration as "the highest stage of resistance ever reached by revolting Blacks"; but it was, as he said, a statement of intentions. It is true that Nyerere's government took measures including nationalising the economy and prohibiting party and state leaders from indulging in capitalist and feudal practices such as owning shares in companies, taking directorships in private enterprises, receiving two or more salaries, and owning houses for renting.

There has been debate on whether or not Nyerere's economic policies were successful, whether the leaders were truly socialist or not, and whether the workers and peasants were really involved in the decision-making process. But Nyerere's legacy lies not so much in his economic policies but rather in his grand vision of Pan-Africanist liberation in which the people of Africa people could say: We have stood up!

Nyerere's nationalism is based on two main premises: that African states should be able to exercise their sovereignty meaningfully; and on the unity of Africa.

Nyerere argued that African mini-states would not be able to defend their sovereignty and independence without uniting. In this, he was as one with Nkrumah. Unfortunately the vision was not realised in his lifetime. But the arguments have greater relevance after the neo-liberalism of the past two decades.

More than its economic impact, neo-liberalism in Africa was a political and ideological onslaught on nationalism. For a while, it helped to rehabilitate imperialism, morally enabling it to go on a political offensive. Neo-liberal policies were a frontal attack on the sovereignty and independence of African states, who lost the right to make their own policies. Ironically, the neo-liberal period laid bare the limits of territorial nationalism and vindicated Nyerere's Pan-Africanism: without unity, Africa will not be able to defend its independence.

Globalisation and neo-liberalism have come full circle. In its extreme form of casino capitalism, neo-liberalism entered a terminal state this year. As capitalist powers rewrite the rules of the game, the African masses are beginning to question the game itself. This was not possible during the high point of neo-liberalism, when we were told that 'there is no alternative' (TINA). The TINA syndrome gripped African rulers, and the prospects of integration into globalisation mesmerised them. Nyerere's successors were no exception. They joined the neo-liberal bandwagon with a vengeance. The ideology of neo-liberalism seemed so strong, that the Arusha Declaration was not only forgotten but unceremoniously buried as politicians set to liberalise and privatise, turning over public assets to rapacious private interests at fire-sale prices. Public goods – education, health services, water, and electricity – were all turned into commodities to be sold for private profit. State coffers were emptied as politicians turned public offices into a vehicle for accumulation. Politicians became rentiers, and rentiers became politicians.

As the neo-liberals' chickens come home to roost, the masses are remembering the Arusha Declaration. Ordinary people are repeating tirelessly: Mwalimu gave us dignity; the Arusha Declaration cared for us, the oppressed and the disregarded: there could be no better tribute to Mwalimu Nyerere's great legacy, Pan-Africanist nationalism. As he once put it graphically, African nationalism can only be Pan-Africanism, otherwise it is "equivalent of tribalism within the context of our separate nation states." **F**