

Opinion

African woes won't be ended by a butcher's knife, even if wielded by an academic

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Professor Makau Mutua, the US-based Kenyan academic, somehow finds the opportunity to say the most outrageous things, especially as regards Africa.

He was at it again as 2019 came to a close. He suggested in a tweet that Somalia is beyond reclamation and so should be carved up and its different portions gifted to neighbouring states.

The disappearance of Somalia would, in his opinion, do the world a lot of good.

Not surprisingly, many Kenyans, Somali and other commentators rounded on him for making such a preposterous proposal. They all thought he had got it all wrong on Somalia and sought to educate him a little.

First, they pointed out, the Somali problem is not the result of conflict between the country's different regions contending for power or influence. And so breaking it apart would be a solution to a non-existent problem.

Second, despite nearly thirty years without an effective central authority, Somalia has survived as a nation and even done better than some supposedly more stable countries.

So there must be some redemptive

virtue among the Somali that can be leveraged to rebuild a unified country and restore normalcy.

That virtue seems to lie in their never-say-die character, their industry, resilience and solidarity that they exhibit both at home and in the diaspora.

Third, few countries can claim to have a stronger sense of nationhood than Somalia. Their history and political ambition has been one of consolidation rather than fragmentation.

Somali-speaking regions of neighbouring countries have at various points in their history agitated to be part of a Greater Somalia, and even fought wars to make this happen.

In the 1960s ethnic Somali in north eastern Kenya fought a secessionist war, called the Shifta (bandit) War, in a bid to become part of Somalia.

More than fifty years later, suspicion of Kenyan-Somalis' loyalties still linger.

In neighbouring Ethiopia, rebellion and secessionist struggles have always been present in the Somali-speaking Ogaden region. Successive governments have not quite found an answer to the problem.

All this is also true for Djibouti.

Fourth, it is possible that the Somali, left on their own, or the situation in their country managed differently, they would have found a solution to their problem.

The continued political problem in Somalia is in part a result of the internal social and political organisation and the presence of various external interests in the country. The latter have in fact made it difficult to find a lasting solution.

Professor Makau Mutua's proposal is not terribly original. Others before him, among them academics and clerics, have in the past proposed dismemberment and even dissolution of countries as a remedy to what they deemed intractable political conflicts.

Some in Rwanda might remember Professor Ali Mazrui's suggestion that divisions that had bedevilled Rwanda, leading finally to the genocide against the Tutsi, could only be ended by the country being swallowed by the bigger Tanzania.

He made the proposal during a public lecture at the then Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) now the College of Science and Technology of the University of Rwanda, a little over sixteen years ago.

His rather simplistic solution was like this: Rwanda is eaten up by a bigger neighbour; it ceases to exist, and so do its problems. Or, in that larger entity, Rwandans become insignificant and of necessity end their supposed quarrels.

Rwandans rounded on the famous political scientist. He looked bewildered at first. Had he spoken out of turn or broken some cultural taboo? In a sense he had. He had broached the unthinkable – the dissolution of their nation. He had not reckoned with two

aspects of the Rwandan reality.

One, Rwanda is a nation-state whose people are proud of their history and culture and distinctiveness. Any assault on that and Rwandans were sure to react the way they did.

Second, remove the external element and Rwandans are perfectly capable of finding solutions to their own national problems. Since Mazrui proposed his remedy all those years ago, Rwanda has experienced an unprecedented period of unity and development never seen before.

Earlier, Catholic clerics, chief among them, Mgr Andre Perraudin, had advanced the idea of ethnic division of the country similar to what obtained in his native Switzerland. He did not get his wish but died still holding on to that view.

Mgr Perraudin's Belgian missionary colleagues had a similar view based on divisions in their own country.

These plans failed, but they hatched other, more sinister ones. Together with the Belgian colonial administration and a local political elite they had formed, they resorted to turning Rwanda into a country exclusively for one section of the population.

First, they implanted an ideology of division and separateness among Rwandans. Then they exiled another section, turned them into foreigners, or when generous, into second class citizens. Finally they sought to exterminate them altogether.

Makau Mutua's proposal of dismemberment of Somalia and annexation of its parts by neighbouring states, Mazrui's remedy of Rwanda disappearing into a much larger Tanzania, or Perraudin's canton solution are simply unworkable. They ignore the history, social organisation and distinc-

tive characteristics of those countries.

They are actually a recipe for wider and more intractable regional instability. In Makau's case, it is really like trying to douse a local fire, only to ig-

nite a regional conflagration.

The views expressed in this article are of the author.

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