

Africa – a home of leaders

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When thinking of great examples of leadership, the continent of Africa may not necessarily be foremost in our thinking. However, Africa has produced many great leaders across a breadth of fields – from science to the arts. Let us take a glance at some of these remarkable people, recognising how their leadership has influenced the lives of their communities and the world at large.

An article by Forbes suggests that commitment –being “down in the trenches”- is an essential quality of leadership (Prive, 2012). Archbishop Desmond Tutu is a leader who needs little introduction; the legacy of this Nobel Peace Prize laureate is cemented by his milieu of accolades and honorary doctorates. Tutu as a fierce, strident and vocal opponent of the South African apartheid regime, worked relentlessly to bring an end to this injustice for nearly 20 years. The crypt of the Archbishop Emeritus’ former *cathedra* (St Geroge’s Cathedral, Cape Town) houses an exhibition of the various faith groups’ struggle against apartheid; an iconic picture catches the eye – it is of Tutu walking arm-in-arm with other clerics against apartheid (Bradlow, 1986). It is an image of tolerance and *ubuntu*, an image of leadership in uniting people to achieve a common goal. Tutu’s commitment is not to his philosophies but rather to the wellbeing of his community; there is no better evidence for this than his continued involvement in the fight against HIV/ AIDS & tuberculosis (Desmond Tutu Foundation, 2015). This is an African leader who has exemplified the principle of selflessness.

Stoicism is also ranked as an important component for good leadership (Privé, 2012). Another candidate we can turn to as an example of good leadership is the first female president of Malawi, Joyce Banda. Stoicism, often colloquially described as a “stiff upper lip”, is far from being restricted to a British mannerism; it speaks to a determination to keep going in the face of great difficulty. Banda is someone who has displayed this leadership characteristic to a great degree, having faced adversity domestically (her first marriage was an abusive relationship) and in her political career surviving an assassination attempt in 2011 to eventually become president (Mukherjee, 2012; Banda, 2013).

Although she only served as president for two years she made a mark on the profile of her country. As is the case in the majority of African countries, homosexuality is criminalised in Malawi. However, after acceding to the Presidency in 2012, it was Banda who displayed a sense of open-mindedness in her campaign to decriminalise homosexuality (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2015). Furthermore, she is an African leader who has not only spoken out against corruption but has made efforts to address it; chief amongst these was the selling of the presidential jet and a self-determined 30% pay-cut which Banda took (Laing, 2012). The cynics amongst us may see this as a political gaffe or nominal gesture. But such a characterisation misses the message here, which is to eschew the trappings of political office, an attitude far from prevalent amongst some Presidential colleagues (think President Koroma of Sierra Leone, known for extravagant motorcades) (The Economist, 2012). Joyce Banda seems to have put her mission ahead of her ego, turning around her country’s economy and allowing reinvigorating donor confidence (Von Stiegel, 2011: p.152).

Finally, a more recent star on the leadership horizon is Thuli Madonsela, who was up until recently the Public Protector of South Africa. This is a role that sees the incumbent investigating misconduct in state affairs; in essence tackling corruption. Most notably, Madonsela's report on so-called "security" upgrades to President Jacob Zuma's Nkandla homestead was a landmark in holding seemingly invincible leaders accountable for mismanagement of state funds (Madonsela & South Africa, 2013/2014). The mark of Madonsela's leadership is her integrity which gave her the ability to stand apart from the leadership and call out the President on his wrongs. Leaders in this sense should not be concerned with the political repercussions that their actions might incur, but rather with the upholding of the heart of the Constitution – the people.

As a continent, Africa has always demonstrated excellent leadership; it is particularly exemplary due to having women in roles at the forefront of politics. At a time of great uncertainty in the world and as the global community faces many quandaries, it is helpful to keep in mind the great examples of leadership which the continent of Africa has gifted the world. We can only hope that more leaders will emulate this style of leadership whereby the people come first.

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