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ADDRESS BY H.E. THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE OAU

DR. SALIM AHMED SALIM

ON THE OCCASION OF HIS CONFERMENT OF THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF CIVIL LAW HONORIS CAUSA

BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MAURITIUS

13 MARCH, 1991

The Chancellor of the University of Mauritius
Your Excellency Vice President of India
Hon. Prime Minister of Mauritius
Distinguished Members of the Faculty
Hon. Ministers
Ladies and Gentlemen

I feel much honoured for this unique opportunity and privilege to be recognized and singled out for conferment of a degree of Doctor of Civil Law Honoris Causa by such a distinguished institution as the University of Mauritius. I take this not only as an honour to me, but a tribute to the Organization of African Unity and to the role it has and continued to play in promoting inter-African understanding and co-operation. Of course this honour acquires added significance as we have convened in Mauritius to join in celebrating the twenty-third anniversary of the independence of this country.

In celebrating this anniversary, we do not celebrate the mere passing of years but the achievements of a people. Allow me therefore, to congratulate the Government and the people of this country for twenty-three years of hard and dedicated service.

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Mr. Chancellor

As we celebrate the independence of Mauritius, we do also celebrate the many achievements of this small but great country. Mauritius is a melting pot of cultures and traditions. It is a country whose people have been brought together into co-operative existence by shared needs and aspiration as well as a strong yearning to forge a nation built on a common identity of interests drawing strength from its diversity. Many of us in continental Africa and far beyond have come to admire the unyielding determination of this nation to forge unity through diversity and create the kind of environment which facilitates greater ability to harness the full energies and creative potentials of its people. Through no benevolence of one or a few but by the determination of the vast majority, this country has done remarkably well in maximizing the opportunities for its energies to development.

Mr. Chancellor

If it has been possible to forge a national identity leverage upon a common agenda, it is largely due to a permitting political environment which has been nurtured and allowed to take root and blossom. This country provides an emulable example of political maturity. Through deliberate political decisions it has been possible to build a culture of political pluralism built on the principles of social justice. Those who have ever doubted about a working democracy in Africa, should perhaps come to Mauritius among others to bear witness.

As a keen student of politics, I have come to admire the parliamentary democratic processes of this country, in which through the years it has become possible to establish working mechanisms which ensure the transparency and accountability of Government while at the same time challenging those governed to civic responsibilities incumbent upon good citizens. It is the ability to strike this balance between obligations of Government and rights of the governed which has given Mauritius the stability - and peace and enabled its people to concentrate their energies to development.

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It is easy, especially for the young, who were born and have grown up in a peaceful Mauritius to take the calm, stability and peace for granted. My wish is to suggest to the students here that it would be a tragic error if they were to take all these for granted. Rather, they should see it as a result of peoples determination and supreme sacrifice, at times at very high cost and thus a challenge they inherit from the preceding generation. They must therefore, work equally hard if not harder, to consolidate and build on these achievements so that when they do pass on the mantle of leadership to their succeeding generations, they shall do so with confidence that they bequeath a stable, healthy, prosperous and peaceful society.

Mr. Chancellor

Perhaps no other place prepares one for such role more than institutions of higher learning like the university. The primary role of the university is to impart knowledge. It is a place where one's mind is trained and challenged to independent thinking. It is a place where ideas should be nurtured and cross-pollinated generally through the process of learning.

Like all the places which bring together the youth, universities are places where dynamism and political vibrancy are engendered - at times to the chagrin of governments. But the primary objective of students is not and must not be the pursuit of political militancy for its sake alone. It must be in furtherance of the imperative of safeguarding the common good of society guided by a passionate yearning to promote justice within it.

The purpose of that vibrancy within universities must be to create a literate society which is more conscious of its place and destiny in society and which is prepared to deploy all its resources and ingenuity to the defence and promotion of social justice. The academic community is not only a custodian of knowledge but also has a responsibility of constructive involvement in the political process of any society. They must be prepared to see and accept limitations of governments. Governments do in turn, have the duty to accept constructive and justified criticism. By this I am saying that the student community must be vigilant and challenge governments to the promotion of social justice within society.

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Their responsibility to society is also to educate itself to its fullest potential so as to make better citizens of tomorrow. The government has a responsibility in turn to provide the facilities of education. In this university whether in Natural Sciences or Liberal Arts, the motivation should be one of creating a society in Mauritius founded on the principles of equality and social justice. It must be one to see the consolidation of constitutional rule in which the respect for human rights is not dependent on one's whims but an automatic imperative inherent in good government.

Students activity can flourish only in peace and harmony. It is as much in the interest of students to contribute to the consolidation of the peace and of the democratic institutions which have and continue to make free political activity and unfettered pursuit for intellectual excellence, a living reality that it is in this country.

The challenge of the youths and students therefore is to pursue education for its essential liberating qualities and as a vehicle for political stability in Mauritius. The students of Mauritius owe this to themselves as much as they do to their country.

Mr. Chancellor

The strong democratic traditions of Mauritius and the economic strides will make greater meaning if they are applied to the greater goals of Africa. Mauritius is an African country, albeit physically separated from the mainland. Mauritius should therefore rise to the challenge of African Unity and co-operation. In this connection I was last night very encouraged and indeed inspired by the Prime Minister's reaffirmation in clear and unequivocal terms of Mauritius position, role and commitment in confronting this challenge. I am glad to note that the government has taken concrete measures to ensure that this country's belonging to Africa takes an institutional expression. For Mauritius and Africa generally now stand at crossroads. With the gradual ending of the decolonization process, save for the persistence of apartheid in South Africa, Africa is now free. Freedom and independence have their own challenges not only of governance but spurring economic development. We prosecuted the struggle for political independence largely with unity as our most potential weapon. We subordinated many of our political differences to the greater good of the liberation of our continent.

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Today more than ever, Africa will need to pull together and act in unity if we are to face the more daunting challenges of economic development. Unity is an imperative and not a favour that African states should do for one another. European countries, some individually economically stronger than the whole of Africa put together, are relentlessly pursuing economic integration of their continent. This is not an act of folly or weakness on their part but a realization that the future lies in greater and more diversified economic entities. The tendency for creating larger economic trading blocs is world-wide and the motor powering that trend is globalization.

Whether Africa plays a meaningful role as a strong partner in the coming era of economic globalization will depend in the main on how united, coherent and economically integrated our continent will be. This is the only defence against further slide into poverty and against marginalization of our continent. My main argument simply is: if Europe sees the need for co-operation and integration, how more for Africa?

Mr. Chancellor

Individually, African countries are in the long run not viable. Even those who may seem strong among the weak African lot cannot survive the vagaries of economic competition of the future. The enterprenurial spirit which has powered the engines of economic growth of this country will be severely undermined if there are no trading opportunities abroad. We must create opportunities within Africa first before branching outside. Of course, we will have to begin with the restoration of the economies on the continent to sound footing, stimulating growth and laying firm foundations for the socio-economic transformation of the continent. Mauritius with its vast experience in the political and economic fields can contribute positively to this process. Africa must hold together and begin with the process of economic integration starting with the most integrative sectors such as transport, communications and trade.

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We should use institutions like the Preferential Trade Area as a genuine vehicle to promote such integration. The expected signature in Abuja, in Nigeria this June of the treaty establishing the African Economic Community will launch the process towards continental integration. The OAU will of course do its utmost to assist member states in the implementation of the Treaty. But beyond the signature of that Treaty lies the more fundamental challenge to member states of demonstrating the necessary commitment to the enterprise and ensuring that it becomes a reality. In this, the Government of Mauritius and I hope, with the further prodding and encouragement of institutions like this one will deploy all efforts to ensure the realization of the so-far elusive dream of continental integration.

Mr. Chancellor

The challenge now before this University and indeed all of us, is to forge an Africa joined together by a common purpose, identity of interest and sustained by a common destiny.

We are one as a people despite our diversity of cultures and ethnicity. We will either triumph as a people collectively or be vanquished separately. These are not the times for disunity for it will be a tragedy for the continent. Universities like this one and other centres of learning do capture that spirit of communities which thrive in diversity. As Africa faces the new challenges of economic integration, these very same institutions should be the bridges between cultures and peoples. In Mauritius, this university should be the bridge that arches across to mainland Africa and sustain the spirit of inter-African co-operation. We in the OAU shall do all possible to be the pylons on which both bases of the bridge are anchored. Once again, I thank you for the honour you have bestowed on me. I also thank you for your kind attention.
