COMMENTARY

We cannot afford to make more mistakes

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Posted Tuesday, July 28 2009 at 20:00

There is a dangerous idea abroad in Africa these days. You hear it from the Zambian Dambisa Moyo, from the Kenyan James Shikwati and from the Ghanaian George Ayittey. You can hear it from Ugandans. Imagine if we took full responsibility for our political and economic development. If you think they already have then you should take it up with two of the country’s most prominent intellectuals.

Introducing his new book, Professor Dani Nabudere suggested that Uganda pursues communist autarky while waiting for the evolution of a fairer international economic order. Autarky is a fancy economics term for “Edo it yourself.” You’ve no choice when you turn your back on a world in a crisis of capitalism.

The Independent’s editor Mr Andrew Mwenda, published an article in the journal Foreign Policy in which he exhorted Western do-gooders and well-wishers to leave Uganda and Africa alone so that they might find their own path to richer and more accountable government. The dangerous idea at the back of these arguments is that one must be free to make mistakes. Indeed, real freedom is impossible without the security of knowing that mistakes are simply part of development. Any leader who tells you that you cannot afford to make mistakes has no interest in your well being, only your compliance with his wishes.
If we accept that mistakes are part of development, then we must also accept that we will pay their costs. This means we have to find ways to manage the risk of policies which could bankrupt governments or cause famine if they are got wrong. But are the risks so great that we must blindly follow a single leader or a single set of ideas, or do nothing?

The freedom to make mistakes implies diversity of thought. It implies a distribution of resource ownership sufficiently equitable to prevent the permanent domination of one part of society over another. Above all the freedom to make mistakes implies decentralised, devolved political power. When the State or a small clique within it holds most of the political power, there are no incentives for outsiders to risk anything other than a coup d'Ã©tat or election victory so that they too might control the levers of government.

But when power resides mostly in the variegated institutions of civil society, or at least in the many lower-level units of local government, resources can be applied to local concerns. Such focused attention promotes risk taking, experimentation and debate. Where these incentives are not present, people are inclined to leave it all to the centre.

In order to bring government and civil society around to an attitude which promotes risk taking, leaders must first get out of the way. Andrew Mwenda's article points at Western politicians and donors, but they can only be part of a solution. Societies need to be freed of overweening external interests at all levels, international, national, and local. Only in this way can we change incentives for leaders to pursue personal over communal gain.

This is not the same thing as suppressing the incentives to profit taking and cost reduction in our businesses. If anything, the incentives to reduce costs and increase benefits in a way which benefits the enterprise and the nation as a whole are the same in government as in business, except that we should define the beneficiaries of government differently than they actually occur today.

If we are to slip the bonds of neo-colonialism, and if we are to make Uganda work for all of us, then there must be real democracy. Genuine pluralism in political power, a stable and equitable and diverse social structure, and an economy built upon individual or small community wealth. Presently Uganda has none of these.

Only when it can present all three to its own people and to the world will we see a Uganda free enough to make its own way and afford the cost getting government to serve all the people.

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