UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI

WELCOMING REMARKS BY PROF. PETER M.F. MBITHI VICE-CHANCELLOR, UNIVERSITY OF NAIROBI, DURING THE OPENING OF AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON “BEYOND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY: THE QUEST FOR INDIGENOUS AFRICAN MODELS OF DEMOCRACY FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY” HELD AT MINI LECTURE THEATRE 5, UoN TOWERS ON MONDAY, MAY 22, 2017 AT 9.30 A.M.
Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen
It gives me great pleasure to join you this morning at the commencement of this important conference on “Beyond Liberal Democracy: The Quest for Indigenous African Models of Democracy for the Twenty-First Century”. I warmly welcome you all to the University of Nairobi, which is the premier Kenyan University, with a history that goes all the way back to 1954. I especially want to welcome delegates from Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Uganda, India, Roumania, the United States of America, and delegates from all other countries represented here.
I also wish to thank the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy for entering into partnership with our Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies to convene this important gathering. Our university always welcomes such initiatives, recognizing that scholarship flourishes best when it draws from a diversity of cultures and academic environments.

Towards the close of the nineteenth century, European powers arbitrarily partitioned our continent, and robbed our people of their right to live in freedom and dignity. However, about seven decades later, through
the hard work of people from all walks of life, one colonial territory after another achieved political independence. The promise of freedom was a promise of justice, peace and prosperity enjoyed by people who governed themselves. However, our various countries have witnessed numerous challenges, not least the successful and unsuccessful military coups, and the emergence of one-party states, all of which threatened to blow out the flame of freedom.
Nevertheless, the 1990s brought new hope, as the so-called second generation constitutions, restoring multi-party modes of governance, began to emerge on the continent; But almost a quarter of a century after the emergence of those constitutions, African states continue to grapple with numerous challenges including corruption, disputed elections, controversies about the independence of the legislature and the judiciary, among others. Many have therefore wondered why almost six decades after political independence, our countries are grappling with fundamental questions about governance.
Consequently, this conference comes at an opportune time. On the one hand, the politics of the day are, of necessity, transient. On the other, sound scholarly inquiry into political processes is timeless, as is evident in the works of Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, among others. Yet all the scholars I have mentioned have their homes in the West. Africa had its own great thinkers, among whom were the highly intellectual priests of ancient Egypt, architects of the great kingdoms of West, East and South Africa, poets, song writers, and other critical thinkers in our indigenous cultures. Such thinkers inspired advocates
of liberation from the yoke of colonialism, and continue to inspire the discourse on post-colonial reconstruction.

I note that your conference seeks answers to three pertinent questions:

1. Is democracy universally applicable, or does it require adaptation to cultural realities?

2. To what extent has the adoption of Western liberal models of democracy hindered democratization in post-colonial African states?
3. How can indigenous African political thought be utilized in the endeavor to design models of democracy that are suited to the socio-cultural realities of post-colonial African states?

Your conference offers a unique opportunity to reflect on these three questions and related ones on at least two counts. First, it has attracted delegates from Africa, Europe, Asia and North America, thereby affording a unique opportunity for dialogue among scholars with diverse cultural backgrounds. Indeed, what you will have is a “polylogue” rather than a dialogue. Second, the delegates in this conference
come from a range of disciplines, among which are philosophy, religious studies, political science, design, anthropology, and law. You are aware that after the specialization in scholarship occasioned by the advent of Western modernity in the twelfth to the nineteenth century, scholars are now recognizing, perhaps more than ever before, that reality is one, and its various facets are inter-connected. As such, academia is recognizing that interdisciplinary research is not a luxury, but rather a necessity.
I understand that the Council for Research in Values and Philosophy will be publishing the proceedings of this conference both on its website and in print. This will ensure that the informed deliberations at this gathering will reach a global audience and facilitate ongoing reflection on, and inquiry into the important issues that you will be deliberating upon.
I wish you very fruitful deliberations, and look forward to the publication of the conference proceedings.

Thank you.

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