

**Statement by Dr Yusuf Al-Azhari  
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I have in the past lived both a good, sweet life as well as a horrifying one. The best parts my life were that I had a good education, held very good positions in the government, which provided me with everything that I humanly wanted. I married the daughter of the then Prime Minister of Somalia, who later became the Head of State through democratic elections. I held high civil servant offices such as Ambassador, Permanent Secretary in various ministries and I had accumulated a very large amount of money and had very good bank account reserves. I thought that no one could change the good life I was enjoying.

However, after several years of this extraordinarily luxurious life the hour of accountability caught up with me. My father-in-law was assassinated, a military junta took over the reigns of power in the country, a new political system based on scientific socialism (communism) was adopted and I was locked behind bars in solitary confinement, in the most brutal manner that a human being could imagine.

I was picked up at 3 o'clock in the morning while sleeping with my loved ones, my wife and four children; was handcuffed, blindfolded and without trial thrown into a small cell measuring 3 x 4 metres, in complete isolation. I remained there for more than six years, with nothing to read, nothing to listen to, and no one to talk to, besides the daily mental harassment and physical torture.

For the first eight months or so of my imprisonment, torment, hate, anger, despair and depression possessed me. I was thinking of the enjoyable life that I had. I was dehydrated and lost half of my weight. I was skin and bones. I was afraid that I might get a stroke, become insane or even die. I am sure if I try to narrate to you the torture I went through, the experience I went through day by day, month by month, some of you sitting here would be shocked and soaked with

tears. You can never imagine how brutal and inhuman some of our African leaders could be.

Then one night I knelt down on my knees at 8 o'clock in the evening, soaked with tears, shivering and perspiring, full of fear, shouting loudly, Oh God, Oh, God, why am I here? What did I do to deserve this? Asking for guidance from Almighty God, to give me first peace and strength within myself, and to provide me with a vision to guide me. I was so determined to get an answer, that I would not get up until I received one. When finally I got up, it was 4 o'clock in the morning; eight hours had passed without notice. I have never had a better eight hours of prayer in my life.

What was then the vision and the guidance I received? I felt to have been told, "Be honest with yourself, and to those around you, and you will be the happiest person for the rest of your life. Don't limit yourself to earthly matters only, but go beyond that." From that day on, fear had no place in me. I was cured and free from hate, anger, despair, depression and the desire greedily for earthly enjoyment only. It was as if I had found my true identity as a simple human being. From that day on I was accountable honestly for all my actions. Love had been planted in my heart and I vowed to serve my fellow countrymen, poor and rich, to reconcile and settle their differences, with honesty, inclusiveness, love and forgiveness.

One night while still in prison a very strong thought came to my mind. Why don't you get rid of your ugly past? By trying to re-evaluate your wrong-doings from the day you could remember. Did you annoy your parents so badly that they did wish that you were not their child? What about your brothers and sisters, your teachers and your friends? It was a trial in which I was to re-examine my whole life, and knowing that I could not cheat the Almighty who knew all about me and my deeds, I had to face the consequences with courage.

Believe me, it is the worst thing that a person could do to himself. I got afraid of myself, due to the wrongs I had done. I had long sleepless nights, depressed, agonised and agitated. But I persisted and no matter how painful it was I finally got over it. It has become a way of life to me today, still evaluating my daily actions.

When I left prison, after some years, a thought struck me again, while sitting in a small coffee shop. I was very quiet and alone. A clear inner voice went through my mind. The message was so strong that it shook me and gave me a headache. Someone was asking me to forgive and get rid of the hatred still concealed deep in my heart. I asked myself, forgive whom? The man who put me in solitary confinement and wanted me to rot in that cell? Was it the devil talking to me or was someone else?

I brushed the idea from my mind, because I saw that, that was impossible. But the idea persisted. It was there whenever I rose for prayers. Finally I had to ask for guidance. It was so clear to me that the Almighty wanted me to clean my heart from that last poisonous hatred, which made me suffer tremendously despite my hiding it.

I was confronted with the hard truth and decision. Confused which way to go. Was the right way to follow my inner voice and get rid of the burdensome, most damaging and haunting hatred forever? Or shall I live with it for the rest of my life, and thus become a prisoner of my own hate, living always with the ugly memories of the past. Depressed and agonised with it, till I depart from this world? The choice was difficult. It was not easy.

I could not enjoy life any more. I had long sleepless nights. I was not the same any more, to my family, friends and people around me. I was in a desperate situation, not able to decide which way to go.

But the man who inflicted upon me all those atrocities was overthrown and he sought asylum in Nigeria. All the properties and wealth, which I had accumulated over the years, had been confiscated while I was in prison. I was completely impoverished by the regime. I did not have the money for an air ticket to take me to Nigeria even if I wanted to. In the evening I just knelt down and prayed. "Oh God, you are my witness that I sincerely forgave that man. Please give me peace and stop bothering me any more."

Three days after that, the miracle happened. I was summoned by the representative of the UN Secretary General to Somalia, Mr Victor Gbeho, who is the present Foreign Minister of Ghana, to inform me that I and two other Somalis had been selected to attend the OAU

Summit Conference of the Head of States which was convening in Dakar, the capital city of Senegal. There was the ticket I was looking for with all per diem paid. All that I had to do was to break my journey at Lagos, in Nigeria, see the man and continue. "God works in a wonderful mysterious way, when He wants."

On the way to Dakar I broke my journey in Lagos and met with the former President. He was sitting on a sofa with rosary beads in his hands as if he was already repenting on what he did. I sat down in front of him and told him that I came all the way from Somalia just to tell him before he or I die, that I forgave him with conviction in the name of God for all that he had done to me, and looked at his face. I could see the emotional struggle, the unbelief that I had uttered the words of forgiveness. After a while, I could see the tears of remorse trickling down his cheeks. When he got hold of himself he said, "thank you, I think tonight, for the first time, I will sleep deeply knowing that people like you still exist in Somalia. That man was the communist dictator, the late Head of State of Somalia.

There and then I vowed that I will commit myself for the rest of my life to the cause of reconciliation and forgiveness, helping my people in Somalia and humanity at large to bring adversaries together wherever I may be needed.

That man inflicted upon me and my compatriots and many thousands of Somalis, untold stories of torture and inhumanity. We in Africa usually tend to speak about our colonial past and their form of torture, oppression and injustice, and rightly so. I am not defending them. But the untold stories of Africans exercising injustice in the most brutal and inhuman way on their own citizens is not in any way less cruel than what has come from our colonialists. I could therefore dare to say that injustice is not a racial issue, but an individual evil component and unless we change individually and get rid of this evil reaction we could never live in harmonious partnership with others.

Forgiving has generated in me a new life free at last. A life which is not contaminated by the ugly past. By forgiving I broke the chain of hatred, insecurity and liberated myself entirely from unhappiness. At last love has been planted in my heart. Forgiveness is a must if one wants to live in a fellow partnership with others.

The people of Somalia are today suffering, from past Bad Leadership. Imposed upon them by their colonial powers. Somalia by nature had a very rich political tradition full of democratic customs which they peacefully pursued prior to the colonization. New customs and culture brought by the invader gradually intruded into the civil society and conflicted with their traditional way of life.

After independence, in order to modernize our system and to make it compatible to that of our colonizers, we adopted the democratic Western style system of government, under a constitution drafted by our colonizers which was entirely alien to us and gave no consideration to our traditional customs and way of life.

Failing to cope with that, we shortly afterwards changed the democratic government system into direct Communism. These three stages of change in a span of thirty years, entirely confused the traditional system of endurance, peaceful and harmonious existence among the Somali clans.

As a result a brutal civil war raged in Somalia which caused untold human sufferings. The collapse of the infrastructure and the economy left the country without a government for the last nine years. Never in the history of human kind has a nation so savagely destroyed its own country due to bad leadership and wrong colonial cultural heritage.

In my opinion, complete withdrawal and sincere reflection on what went wrong, and to accept to forget animosity and commence to forgive and heal the wrong doings of the past would be far more rewarding to all Somalis who want to rebuild their nationhood. Hard as it may be, this is the truth. For we all know deep in our hearts that nothing is comparable to truth in satisfying ourselves.

As human beings we all confess that we make errors and big errors. But as Frank Buchman teaches, "Man is not the helpless victim of sin and error". We could overcome many errors and sins, if we commit ourselves to recognize our mistakes sincerely and accept to change. We must accept transformation from bad to good and regeneration with full confidence. The Somalis must realize that to avenge those injured, to take revenge, to hate and to continue to lament on past

actions is not constructive. Creating confidence and building trust among adversaries would enable them to rescue the country from complete disaster. Only with a complete change of heart and attitude, from negative to positive and through divine love, based on forgiveness and genuine reconciliation, would all Somalis benefit.

After the failure of the international communities, twelve times, to solve the Somali impasse collectively, pursuing the TOP - BOTTOM solution; we recently introduced, with the grace and guidance of the Almighty, the BOTTOM - UP system. Starting our consultations from the grassroots at village level. We sidetracked the faction leaders and instead involved the Traditional Leaders, the Religious Leaders, the Clan Elders, the Intellectuals and the Women's Associations, in order to find a healthier solution. We created first an atmosphere of confidence, among those involved and cemented our action with trust building through the forgiveness factor. Our task to reach the heart of everyone, with the Grace of God, became easier. And thus two States with full-fledged self-governments has been established in the Northwest and Northeast.

Recently, under the wise leadership of President Ismail Omar Geleh of the Djibouti Republic: a Somali national government has been formed with a Head of State, Parliament and an executive government. However, the two Northern State governments did not recognize the government that was established in Djibouti. Thus making it lack the support of the entire Somali population. Our task remains to bring together all those political forces to reconcile and come up with an acceptable solution that will satisfy all.

In no way am I trying to minimize the complexity of the chronic political quagmire that exists in Somalia due to the devastating civil war. I am aware that a massive grassroots revolution must be undertaken so that Somalia becomes the first experimental country in Africa, where Moral Revival is used as a vehicle to reform politics; and thus enlightening and encouraging the Somali clans to live together in peace, harmony and respecting one another.

On the other hand, we are all aware that Somalia is not the only country in Africa, which had, or is suffering from Bad Leadership. Quite a number of countries have very severe problems. As a result,

we Africans need to study our problems with sincerity and transparency and come up with the Correct Diagnosis. It is only when we come up with a clean balance sheet that others will constructively contribute and come to our rescue. Africa is rated to be the first among the DEBT owners in the world. Yet the African governments are much poorer now, than when they received the DEBT. We need the help of the international community; "YES"! but only after we do our part honestly and get rid of the evil components that plague all our efforts to develop into a healthier society.

In my opinion the source of all these problems in Africa is poverty. Poverty, not because the continent lacks resources. But because of bad leadership. Poverty in the minds of those we elect as leaders. The persistent practice of un-equitable distribution of resources, corruption, nepotism and greed are the incurable diseases that deprive the continent to recover economically and emancipate.

If the African states could have an honest, God-fearing, Unselfish Leadership, most of the now prevailing quagmire and failures would have been easily eradicated. Africa would have been economically advanced and thus take its place among the economically healthy nations of the world. We in Africa, therefore, should have the courage and will, to honestly re-examine the failure of the African leaders for the past forty years of independence and ask ourselves why African states did not emancipate in any direction with all the Potentialities and Richness the continent possesses? One could say it is due to the conspiracy of the advanced countries and the connivance of our former colonizers. Others would condone it is due to mal-administration and bad leadership in Africa. I would agree that both contentions are correct beside other motives.

Is it not true therefore that unless we have good Patriotic African Leaders who are not Selfish, Corrupt and Power Hungry, we would not be able to tackle the conspiracy of the advanced countries who encouraged our Leaders to remain in power egoistically for their advantage and selfish interest? Should we tolerate the status quo of the African Leadership we got used to since the sixties without re-evaluation of some kind? Or should we honestly try to diagnose the issue by opening a Frank and Sincere dialogue to expose the true causes of our dilemma. Every African patriot is aware of what has

happened to Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, the Congo and some others that may follow suit unless something is done today.

I proposed at the last MRA Conference held in Bloemfontein to convene a Fact-Finding Conference "ON WHAT WENT WRONG IN AFRICAN LEADERSHIP FOR THE LAST FORTY YEARS"

My suggestion was to invite to such a conference as participants:

- (a) Former African Heads of States and governments (both black and white) who are either toppled or gracefully handed over power to their successors and who are still alive, with their closest advisors.
- (b) Recognize traditional leaders of Africa
- (c) Highly qualified and learned African administrators
- (d) a selected, capable group from the Women's Associations
- (e) Selected individuals from the international communities, preferably from the advanced countries of Asia and South America because of the similarities of the problems.

At that conference His Excellency Sir Howard Cooke, the Governor General of Jamaica, was present and I challenged him to host such a conference, which he gladly accepted. In renewing my proposal, today I hereby call upon His Excellency Madiba, Nelson Mandela, the former Head of State of South Africa to spearhead the realisation of such a conference, which will be a precious inheritance for the future generation.

I believe if we Africans sincerely hold hands and call for such a conference and honestly try to search for the truth of the problem without any reservation we can find a real solution for our continent and could make Africa emancipate and become second to none on this planet.