

## Tribute to Professor Ali Al'Amin Mazrui, 1933-2014: One of the World's Most Renowned Scholars

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**W**e should think of Ali as a long distance runner from a continent that specialises in giving the world some of its best long distance runners. Ali ran to his last breath: the ink kept flowing and the corpus kept growing, and the voice was as booming as ever.

I first met Ali at Makerere University in 1972. I was a teaching fellow who had just embarked on my doctoral thesis. Ali was the professor. We came from two different generations. His was the last in the battle against colonialism. Mine was the first to enjoy the fruits of independence. It was a time of intoxication for both of us.

The young Mazrui had been catapulted from the position of a lecturer to that of a professor in a short span of time. This helicopter rise was a testimony to two facts. The first was that just as a newly independent country had to have its own flag and national anthem, an African university in a newly independent African

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country had to have an African professor. That Mazrui was chosen to be that professor pointed to a second fact: he was among the best of home grown timber.

Professor Mazrui's story over the past decades has been one of tenacity and stamina under great pressure. I witnessed several moments in this journey, three in particular, each identified with a different place: Makerere, Dar es Salaam and Michigan.

The single most impressive aspect of Mazrui at Makerere was that, although he was a beneficiary of nationalism, he was not dazzled by it. He was, indeed, among the first to recognise the Janus-faced power of nationalism, in particular its tendency to ride roughshod over both minorities – ethnic and religious – and dissidents in the majority.

The young Ali stood for a tradition of free speech and critical inquiry. Though he often put his critique in the then dominant language of English liberalism, his call for free speech was seldom articulated in a narrow sense, as the privileged inheritance of elite intellectuals, but usually in a broad sense, as vital to the functioning of a healthy social order.

Full of zest and fearless, Ali's favorite past time was to target icons of the intellectual left. One has only to return to the era of *Transition* magazine, to Ali's collaboration with its editor, Rajat Neogy, to find pieces that have since become legendary. I am thinking of two in particular: "Nkrumah, the Leninist Czar," and "Tanzaphilia." But Ali did not just aim at distant targets from a safe distance. He spoke just as critically of the growth of nationalist power and autocracy at home. On the morrow of Idi Amin's 1972 Asian expulsion, Ali distributed a signed pamphlet at Makerere. It was titled "When Spain Expelled Jews." He did not wait to register



his opposition after the event; he took the risk of voicing it when the risk of doing so was immense.

At Makerere University, Ali established a tradition of bringing urgent social issues into the university. At the same time, he took the tradition of free speech into society. He was a public intellectual in the finest sense of the word.

Idi Amin's expulsion of Asians pushed me out of Makerere and I took a job at the University of Dar-es-Salaam. There, I was witness to a no-holds-barred debate between Ali Mazrui, by now an icon of post-colonial liberalism, and Walter Rodney, its most vociferous critic. No energy was spared. If words could produce fire, fires would have raged.

What was at issue in the Mazrui-Rodney debate? The debate was about nationalism and imperialism. Immediately, though, it was a debate over two issues: first, the role of imperialism and, second, the relationship of intellectuals to nationalism in power.

From today's vantage point, we can say that in no way was the debate wasted energy. Rodney emphasised *dependency*, and the external constraints on nationalist power. Ali, in contrast, highlighted the internal face of nationalism, its tendency to erode *democracy*.

That debate had no clear winner and no clear loser. And for precisely that reason, the debate did not end. It continued to rage inside Mazrui.

When I arrived at the University of Michigan, first as a visiting lecturer in the mid-70s and then as a visiting Professor in the mid-80s, I thought the Ali Mazrui I met had changed. When I asked Ali where I should locate my office, in the Centre for African and African-American Studies or in the Department of Political Science, his response was swift: it depends on whether you want a home or an office. Forced to migrate to the belly of the beast, Ali had begun to see beyond the liberal claims of political theorists to the reality of life in the empire. He had begun to see

the other face of empire: racism in the seventies and the war on terror in the new century. I thought he was beginning to sound more and more like Walter Rodney. Ali, among the first critics of nationalism, had turned into the latest critic of empire.

There is one crucial similarity between prophets on the one hand and public intellectuals on the other. Both seek to define the terms of the debate in an argument. But the terms of a debate cannot be defined alone; this endeavor requires a worthy adversary. It is in this sense that Ali and Rodney defined the terms of the debate in the 1960s. Sooner or later, all of us realised that we did not have to agree with Ali to be influenced by him.

Let us celebrate the life of Ali Mazrui, a great son of Africa, a compassionate father, and a public intellectual who defined the terms of political debate for his generation!

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