

## IN DEFENSE OF KWAME NKRUMAH'S POLITICAL FREEDOM

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### *Abstract*

*In this paper, we set out to evaluate Kwame Nkrumah's theory of political freedom and his contribution to the struggle for political and economic independence of the colonial peoples of Africa and the Blacks in the Diaspora. Though we find that this theory and Nkrumah's idea of a united Africa have been critically challenged, this paper attempts to show that most of the attacks on his ideas are unwarranted. In this paper, we argue in defense of Nkrumah's theoretical and practical struggles for freedom of Africans from the forces of colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism.*

**Keywords:** Freedom, Independence, Colonialism, Imperialism, Neo-colonialism, Development

### **Introduction**

**F**rancis Osagyefo Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana was an enigma. To some, he was a hero; while to others, he was a villain. However, one thing his worst enemy could not deny him is that he was in-

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spired by the ideals of freedom, equality and justice. This informed his theory of freedom. The main concerns of Nkrumah's political theory include; how to eradicate colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism and exploitation of the colonized peoples of Africa and peoples of African descent the world over, as well as how African states could attain a sustainable socio-political and economic development. Nkrumah was disenchanted with the way the colonized African peoples were put under the heavy yoke of foreign imperial powers at the time. He was conscious of the fact that the exploiters know no other law outside their interest which is captured in exploitation. He also realized that unless the exploiters were given the fiercest fight of their lives, they would not quit of their own volition. With rare temerity, political sagacity, exemplary diligence, coupled with high intellectual competence, Nkrumah saw Ghana through political independence within a short time and wished same for mother Africa as a political entity. These ideals informed this paper's interest in his theory of political freedom.

### **Nkrumah's Theory of Political Freedom**

In order to better understand Nkrumah's notion of political freedom, let us find out what is meant by the term 'freedom'. There are two possible conceptions of freedom: Positive and negative freedom. By positive freedom, "a man is said to be free to the extent that he can choose his own goals or course of conduct" (Edward, 1967:221). That means one can choose between available alternatives, and one is not compelled to act nor is prevented from acting. By negative freedom, it means "the absence of coercion or constraints imposed by another person or authority" (Ibid. 222).

Nkrumah's notion of freedom encompasses both positive and negative aspects. He believes that a man should always be free from compulsion to decide his actions, and should not be constrained by a person or an authority to act contrary to his volition. His emphasis, however, is on free-

dom as it affects colonial Africans and the Blacks in the Diaspora. By colonialism, Nkrumah means “the policy by which the mother country, the colonial power, binds her colonies to herself by political ties with the primary objective of promoting her own economic advantages” (Nkrumah, 1962:2). His notion of colonial freedom debunks the claim that humanitarian aid is the primary motive underlying the quest for colonies, colonial administration and policies. Rather, he shows with abundant proofs that the primary motive is rooted in economic exploitation; and that beneath the ‘humanitarian’ cover-up of colonial governments, a proper scrutiny would lead one to discover nothing but deception, hypocrisy, oppression and exploitation.

Thus, Nkrumah points out that the Pacts of the Conference of Berlin (1890), the Treaty of Versailles (1919), the Covenant of the League of Nations (1920), and the Trusteeship System of the United Nations Organization (1945) were adopted to camouflage the economic philosophy of colonial powers so as to exploit the colonies with impunity. He further asserts that the material development - railways, roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, etc., which are noticeable in selective parts of the colonies, are merely accidental adjuncts to facilitate the economic exploitation of such colonies. He notes that the colonial powers built hospitals because if the health of the colonial subjects was not taken care of, it would not only jeopardize their own (colonialists’) health, but diminish the productive power of the colonial labourers. According to him, the colonialists built schools in order to satisfy the demand for clerical activities and occupations for foreign commercial and mercantile concerns. Nkrumah observes that the roads the colonial masters built led only to the mining and plantation centres. He maintains finally, that any humanitarian act of any ‘power’ towards the ‘ward’ was merely to enhance the power’s primary objective: economic exploitation (Ibid. 27).

From all indications, Nkrumah's devotion to the struggle for freedom was rooted in his agitation against colonial exploitation of Africa. In the foreword of his book, *Towards Colonial Freedom*, he states inter alia:

In 1942, when I was a student in the United States of America, I was so revolted by the ruthless colonial exploitation of Africa that I knew no peace. The matter exercised my mind to such a degree that I decided to put my thoughts in writing and to dilate on the results of some of my researches concerning the subjects of colonialism and imperialism (Nkrumah, 1962:ix).

Through his meticulous study of colonialism, Nkrumah discovers that the evil of economic exploitation could only be destroyed when the colonies attain political freedom. According to him, "The basis of colonial territorial dependence is economic, but the basis of the solution of the problem is political" (Ibid. xv). In other words, political independence is an indispensable step towards economic emancipation. Hence, his clarion call when he stepped on the soil of Ghana after his long stay in America was: "Seek ye first the political kingdom and all other things shall be added unto thee" (Acquah, 1992:19).

In the "Declaration to the Colonial Peoples of the World" written by Nkrumah, approved and adopted by the Pan-African Congress held in Manchester, England, from October 15<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup>, 1945, Nkrumah writes:

The object of imperialist powers is to exploit. By granting the right to the colonial peoples to govern themselves, they are defeating that objective. Therefore, the struggle for political power by the colonial and subject peoples is the first step towards, and the necessary prerequisite to, complete social, economic and political emancipation (Nkrumah, 1962:44-45).

In Nkrumah's view, all peoples wish to be free, as the desire for freedom is rooted in the soul of every one of us. He believes, however, that a people long subjected to foreign domination do not always find it easy to translate that wish into action. Under arbitrary rule, he notes:

People were apt to become lethargic; their senses were dulled, fears became the dominant force in their lives: fear of breaking the law, fear of punitive measures which might result from an unsuccessful attempt to break loose from their shackles (Nkrumah, 1963:50).

Nkrumah, however, advises that:

Those who led the struggle for freedom must break through these apathy and fear. They must give active expression to the universal longing to be free. They must strengthen the people's faith in themselves, and encourage them to take part in the struggle for freedom, they must declare their aims openly and unmistakably, and organize the people towards the achievement of their goal for self-government (Ibid. 50).

Very importantly, Nkrumah demands for two elements in every movement for independence in a colonial situation: the demand for political freedom; and the revolt against poverty and exploitation. He further counsels that, "Resolute leadership is required to subordinate the understandable desire of the people for better living conditions to the achievement of the primary aim of the abolition of colonial rule" (Ibid.51). He is of the view that Africans must fight for their freedom. This is because according to him, freedom was not ordinarily won on the platter of gold. He notes that "Freedom is not a commodity which is 'given' to the enslaved upon demand; it is a precious reward, the shining trophy of struggle and sacrifice" (Ibid. xv).

Towards this end, he spells out the things needed for national liberation. Amongst these were the organization of labour and youths, and the abolition of political illiteracy. These, he maintains, should be accomplished through mass political education of the colonial peoples. There was the need, he emphasizes, to do away with the kind of intelligentsia which had become the very architects of colonial enslavement. He points out also that, the apostles of reaction should be swept away because their self-interest had made them enemies of progress.

Nkrumah believes that to succeed in the struggle for colonial freedom, there must be a revolution, and the essential forger of this change, he notes, is a strong, well-organized, broadly-based political party. Such a party should be knit together by a programme of action that is accepted by all the members, who also submit themselves to the party's discipline. He is of the opinion that the organization must be an agent of progress. It must find the ablest amongst its youth and train their special interest (technological, scientific and political) and establish an education fund to encourage students of the colonies to study at home and abroad, and must found schools of its own for the dissemination of political education (Nkrumah, 1962:41).

One other essential prerequisite for the success of the liberation movement, Nkrumah notes, is the ownership of the press. He observes that the issue of publicity, involving the spreading of information about the aims and achievements of any political party, are of supreme importance. In the struggle for Independence where the colonial government controlled the major avenues of information and gave its blessing to the reactionary press, the mechanics of propaganda employed by the freedom movement is very important.

Again, to ensure the success of the struggle for colonial freedom, Nkrumah insists that every segment of the colonial society must be involved in the struggle. This fact made him to declare that:

If we are to banish colonialism utterly from our continent, every African must be made aware of his part in the struggle. Freedom involves the uniting efforts of everyone engaged in the struggle for it. The vast African majority must be accepted as the basis of government in Africa (Nkrumah, 1963:56).

Very importantly, also, Nkrumah recognized the potentials of the women folk in the struggle for political freedom. For instance, at the time of campaign for 'immediate self-government' in Ghana, Nkrumah made the Ghanaian women toured the length and breadth of the country, and the latter proved their liberating mettle. In this respect, Nkrumah attests:

So fervent were these women, in fact, that while I was in goal and the party organization was at its most critical period, I learned that at a rally in Kumasi, a woman party member who adopted the name of Ama Nkrumah ('Ama' being the female equivalent of 'Kwame') got up on the platform and ended a fiery speech by getting hold of a blade and slashing her face. Then, smearing the blood over her body, she challenged the men present to do likewise in order to show that no sacrifice was too great in their united struggle for freedom and independence (Nkrumah, 1957:109).

Further still, Nkrumah is an incurable believer in a free and liberated Africa. Thus, when he was asked to come up with a quotation for a Calendar in 1948; his suggestion was exceptional. He was reported to have written thus: "Oh God, if I should die, let me die in a free and liberated Africa" (Acquah, 1992:131).

Nkrumah believes that it is only through the unity of the African peoples that their freedom could be speedily attained. Thus, Budu Acquah, an

intimate friend of Nkrumah, reported the visionary leader to have uttered these prophetic words in 1948:

Let us unite our forces against the forces of tyranny, imperialism and colonialism. Youths of Africa, awake for redemption, so that when the gates of heaven are opened by Peter, we shall sit in heaven to see our children driving their own airplanes and commanding their own forces (Ibid.124).

Even when some African countries were politically free, Nkrumah maintains that they lacked genuine economic freedom. He believes that, "Only a united Africa can redeem its past glory as well as renew and reinforce its strength for the realization of its destiny. We are today the richest and yet the poorest of continents, but in unity our continent could smile in a new era of prosperity and power" (Nkrumah, 1967:17).

Finally, no doubt, Nkrumah was one of the few African leaders who fought foreign rule to a standstill without resort to racial discrimination. A good evidence for this is that, the next day he was released from prison, he met with the press and declared that: "I came out of gaol and into the Assembly without the feeling of bitterness to Britain. I stand for no racialism, no discrimination to any race or individual, but I am unalterably opposed to imperialism of any form" (Ibid.106).

### **Evaluation**

Nkrumah has been criticized on many grounds concerning his views on colonial freedom. First and foremost, it has been argued, especially among his political opponents in the United Gold Coast Convention that the economic freedom of dependent territories should be allowed to precede their self-governments. This made his opponents to opt for 'self-government within the shortest possible time' against Nkrumah's 'self-government now'. By this, they hoped (naively though), that the colonial masters



would help them put their economies in proper shape before graciously thrusting political independence upon them on a platter of gold.

Nkrumah, however, provided credible anti-thesis to this criticism by arguing that “To imagine that the colonial powers will hand freedom and independence to their colonies on a silver platter without compulsion is the height of folly” (Nkrumah, 1962:xvi-xvii). He warns that:

Those who formulate the colonial issue in accordance with the false point of view of colonial powers, who are deluded by the futile promises of ‘preparing’ colonial peoples for self-government, who feel that their imperialist oppressors are rational and moral and will relinquish their ‘possessions’ if only confronted with the truth of the injustice of colonialism are tragically mistaken. Imperialism knows no law beyond its own interests (Ibid. xiv).

Again, Nkrumah has been criticized for his notion of a united Africa. In this, his critics accuse him of nursing an inordinate ambition to rule Africa as a political entity; and that he (Nkrumah) was not mindful of the development of the continent, vis-à-vis the unevenness of available natural endowment. For instance, when Nkrumah put forward his idea of an African High Command at the 1964 OAU summit, he met a caustic rebuff from Julius Nyerere, who accused him of employing the notion of Union Government for Africa for propaganda purposes (Nyerere, 1967:301).

To this criticism, we believe that Nkrumah has been misunderstood. This contention is borne out of the available evidences which show that Nkrumah, indeed, placed the love of mother Africa above any personal aggrandizement. This paper notes that Nkrumah attempted ensuring that Africa could play the roles America and the defunct USSR were playing within the global system at the time. Thus, on his release from prison for declaring ‘Positive Action’, Nkrumah addressed the newly elected members of Ghana Assembly on the dangers that faced them in fraternizing with the

colonialists. By 'Positive Action', Nkrumah means peaceful and constitutional steps necessary by the colonial people to dislodge the colonialists. In concluding that address, he remarked:

The die is cast; the exploited and oppressed people of colonial Africa and elsewhere are looking up to us for hope and inspiration. Progressive people in Britain and elsewhere are also solidly behind us. The torch of the liberation movement has been lifted up in Ghana for the whole of West Africa and it will blaze a trail of freedom for other oppressed territories (Acquah, 1992:133).

It could be seen from the afore-stated Nkrumah's view, that Ghana was at this time a source; and of course, a major source of inspiration for the oppressed Africans. This fact made Nkrumah to declare with great vehemence on the eve of Ghana's independence, as the Union Jack was lowered for the last time in the Gold Coast and the country assumed the new name, 'Ghana' that, "The independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked up with the total liberation of Africa" (Acquah, 1992:132).

Adeleke Dapo is of this persuasion when he avers that, "Kwame Nkrumah believed in and worked for the unity of African countries. He saw Ghana as a small part of his dream of the union of African states. He was ready to give up the sovereignty of Ghana to the union" (Adeleke, 2009:79-80).

It is to be pointed out that, in advocating a united government in Africa, it could not have been the case that Nkrumah was not abreast with the unevenness of development in Africa, both politically and economically. This is because he noted that some of the African countries were poor in natural resources, while others are rich; some achieved independence comparatively easily and peacefully while others were still struggling. In spite of all these, Nkrumah's resolution on African unity is overwhelming. According to him, development could be properly and cohesively planned only when African states are united.

Though some African leaders regarded Nkrumah's idea of a United States of Africa as unattainable in his lifetime, even after death, Nkrumah has kept the debate alive through his books. However, the most visible impact of his ideas on African unity has been the institutional transformation of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) into the African Union (AU) in Durban, South Africa, in July 2002. At the sixth Pan-African Congress held in Tanzania in the early 1970s, President Julius Nyerere confessed that he regretted opposing Nkrumah's earlier idea of a united Africa (Chachage & Cassam, 2010:147), noting that the reason the project failed was because many of the leaders "had vested interest in keeping Africa divided" (Ama, 2008:147). Again, at the fifth Summit of the AU held in Libya in July 2005, the then Libyan leader, Muammar Gaddafi seemed to have resurrected the ghost of Nkrumah when he criticized those who considered the idea of a united Africa impossible. According to him, "had we heeded Nkrumah's advice at that time, Africa would now be like the United States of America or at least close to it" (Ibid. 148).

Moreover, Nkrumah has been criticized for seeing the need for a strong, well-organized political party as a pre-condition for a successful struggle for freedom. His critics view this as the beginning of dictatorship, and they always see his Convention People's Party as representing this authoritarianism. As a matter of fact, on the basis of this, Tibor Szamuely, a Hungarian, who taught at Nkrumah's Ideological Institute in 1966, in his Introduction to A.A. Afrifa's *The Ghana Coup: 24<sup>th</sup> February 1966*, labelled Nkrumah "a fascist" (Afrifa, 1966:15). Henry L. Bretton, in another contemporary account, sees Nkrumah as "a vain, easily-led, venal dictator" (Bretton, 1966:xii). Also, Ali Mazrui paints a dismal picture of Nkrumah's leadership, accusing him of operating a single party state and an undemocratic government by introducing legislations to restrict various freedoms in Ghana in what he (Mazrui) terms 'Negative Nkrumahism' (Mazrui, 2005:22).

In this paper, we concede the fact that such terms as 'authoritarianism', 'totalitarianism', and 'dictatorship' which are anti-theses of the term 'freedom' championed by Nkrumah, sometimes feature in his works and utterances. For instance, in the preface to his *Autobiography*, Nkrumah declares that:

Capitalism is too complicated a system for a newly independent nation; hence, the need for a socialistic society. But even a system and democratic constitution may need backing up, during the period following independence, by emergency measures of a totalitarian kind. Without discipline, true freedom cannot survive (Nkrumah, 1957:iv).

It is regrettable if in employing these anti-democratic terms as the ones above, Nkrumah allowed the meaning and essence of freedom to be lost in him. This is where the danger of introducing measures of a totalitarian regime lies. That is, one may not know when it begins to erode the liberty of the people the measure is set out to assist in the first place.

On a closer look, however, one would see that democracy cannot thrive under absolute freedom. As Nkrumah rightly observed, there is the need for a strong, well-organized political party or organization with high degree of discipline, if any reasonable level of development is to be achieved in a post-independence colonial territory. This way, sustainable development - both economic and political, would be ensured. This was the case with the post-independence CPP of Ghana under Nkrumah's leadership. To succeed in an argument against Nkrumah on this matter, there is the need for concrete evidence of Nkrumah's and the CPP's totalitarian actions devoid of all elements of utilitarianism for the society in the long run. In this respect, following multiple attempts on his life, Nkrumah seemed to have been justified in proposing a constitutional amendment to curtail some freedom so as not to allow Ghana to be plunged into chaos.

Furthermore, Mazrui also accuses Nkrumah of making conscious efforts at stamping his name in history by force. Mazrui opines:

There is little doubt that quite consciously, Nkrumah saw himself as an African Lenin. He wanted to go down in history as a major political theorist – and he wanted a particular stream of thought to bear his own name. Hence, the term ‘Nkrumahism’ – a name for an ideology that he hoped would assume historic and revolutionary status as ‘Leninism’ (Mazrui, 2005:9).

Arguably, Mazrui’s writing about Nkrumah above is guilty of the fallacy of *ad hominem*, for leaving important issues raised in Nkrumah’s political theories only to attack his personality. There seems, in Mazrui’s opinion, to be something wrong in one working hard to stamp his feet down in history as a major theorist as Nkrumah did. However, in what Mazrui terms ‘Positive Nkrumahism’, Nkrumah was vindicated when Mazrui was quoted to have noted that, Nkrumah’s leadership “provides inspiration and motivation for a better future for Africa and African people” (Ama, 2008:130).

In confirming Nkrumah’s enviable leadership quality and achievements, the former Ghanaian President was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1961 by the defunct Soviet Union. Also, in 2000, he was voted Africa’s Man of the Millennium by listeners of the BBC World Service. Adeleke Dapo again recalls Nkrumah’s achievements in the following words:

True to his words, Nkrumah started transforming the country. Ghana was the wealthiest and most social among other African countries. Nkrumah established schools, railways, hospitals, social security, and there were activities of buying and selling. He built roads and bridges to make travelling and business activities easy and safe for the people. He had tap water systems made in the villages. He also

constructed concrete drains for latrines and did many other good things. He constructed Akosombo Dam on the Volta River in eastern Ghana. The Dam is the biggest in Africa, and from it electricity was, and is still being generated for the country (Adeleke, 2009:78).

Very importantly, Nkrumah has been harshly criticized for lacking the political and economic means to support the dependent territories and African freedom fighters as they rose against their colonial masters. In the same vein, he is criticized for encouraging African students to kick against imperial authorities only to abandon them in their hours of need, especially when the colonial administrations expelled such students from their schools (e.g. the students of Achimota College in Ghana).

As a counter critique, this paper observes that the above account is not the true reflection of Nkrumah's commitment to the cause of the liberation movements and distraught students in his time. Indeed, when in 1950, France wanted to bring Sekou Toure and the people of Guinea on their knees for preferring 'self-government with danger to servitude in tranquility', Nkrumah quickly came to their aid with a loan of Five Million Pounds Sterling (Acquah, 1992:136). Also, it is on record that in the course of the struggle for the liberation of other colonial territories, Nkrumah sent valuable materials to the African freedom fighters (Ibid. 137).

Moreover, Nkrumah has been criticized for being inconsistent in his methods of achieving freedom for the colonial peoples in Africa and the Blacks in the Diaspora. His critics specifically draw attention to the initial stage of Nkrumah's nationalism, when he preached demonstrations and actions against colonialism, imperialism, exploitation, racial segregation and discrimination, based on Mahatma Gandhi's principles of non-violence. He was to later embrace violence as the only means by which freedom could be achieved.

To understand Nkrumah's shifted position as pointed out above, we consider it imperative to revisit the situation reports on the activities of the liberation movements at Nkrumah's time. Unfolding events in the colonies then showed that the peaceful demonstrations of the liberation movements were more often times met with violence from colonial governments. Brutality from police was ferocious. Jail sentences and savage beatings were lodged on peaceful protesters. Ama Biney captures Nkrumah's mood when he notes:

There is a discernible radicalization as Nkrumah's intellectual thought developed . . . He had clearly abandoned the constitutional path to independence and begun to adopt revolutionary armed struggle as the only solution to Africa's myriad problems of capitalism, neo-colonialism and imperialism. The unfolding social and political struggle in Vietnam and Latin America, and the unrest in America's black cities impacted profoundly on his thinking (Ama, 2009:82).

Thus, Nkrumah and his allies came to the bitter conclusion that unless force was used, the colonialists would not let go their 'preys'. This perhaps made Nkrumah to assert that, "In Africa, the nature of the freedom struggle has varied according to the background conditions against which it has to operate and the position of the international scene at a given time" (Nkrumah, 1963:53). Hence, Nkrumah's seeming inconsistency in the methods of achieving liberation is not without justification. A situation dictates corresponding appropriate reactions. If anything, it portrays him as a dynamic and pragmatic leader.

Also, by adopting armed struggle as the only viable means of winning freedom from the colonialists, Nkrumah has been accused of acting immorally, and contrary to the African nature of loathing to shed blood. To this charge, however, Nkrumah responds that if years of atrocities pepe-

trated in the West were not seen from the moral angle, the same should not be viewed in Africa from any ethical perspective. He writes:

The moral argument is easily destroyed. Centuries of liberation wars, wars of conquest, revolution and counter-revolution in the West were not considered to be moral or immoral. They were simply part of Western historical development. Hence, our armed struggle for freedom is neither moral nor immoral; it is a scientific historically-determined necessity (Nkrumah, 1968:19).

From the foregoing, it should be noted that the Western powers, in collaboration with some African leaders, merely carried out hostile propaganda against Nkrumah by claiming that he wanted to impose his freedom advocacy on the whole of Africa. Today, however, Africans know better. Many decades after the Addis Ababa meeting which gave birth to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), Africans have come to realize more than ever, the urgent need for an African High Command, the need to break the artificial barriers created by the colonial powers and allow the free movement of people and goods within the African sub-regions. The metamorphosis of OAU into African Union (AU) is a reflection of some of the ideals Nkrumah used his entire life to pursue for mother Africa.

### **Conclusion**

On the basis of the foregoing discussion, this paper agrees with Rosberg and Jackson's characterization of Nkrumah as a 'political prophet' (1981:199) because the classification is consistent with his inspirational leadership and elevation to the pantheon of Africa's martyrs and saints since his death. Consequently, this paper contends that despite the criticisms levelled against him, the memories of Nkrumah will linger on endearingly in the hearts of the oppressed people of the world, especially Africans, whose essence he successfully restored.



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