



Reflections On Cold War And Africa's Human Progress

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In contrast to 30 years ago, the world is a better place in consideration of almost all the metrics of human development including economic growth, healthcare, access to education, and human right. This rate of progress is unprecedented in human history. My colleague at African Liberty, Alexander Hammond, has done incredible work on global human progress for the Cato Institute.

Unsurprisingly, it's only after the Cold War that we have seen extraordinary advancements in technology and declines in global poverty rates. But before the fall of the Berlin Wall, the world was divided. While Russia led the Soviet Union on a mission to turn the world into a communist paradise, the United States (US) invested huge resources to stall the Soviet Union's communist ambitions. The two countries, Russia and the United States, had distinct philosophical worldviews; communism and capitalism. Because of their differences, they both exploited many resources to advance their ideologies to every corner of the globe.

The clash of these ideologies has resulted in incessant global instability, which negatively affects almost all regions of the world. Multilateral institutions like the United Nations became an ideological battlefield for the two powers.

In that tumultuous period in human history, none of us benefited; in fact, things became worse for much of the developing world with political dysfunction fuelled, in part, by the Cold War. Today, sadly, people tend to underestimate the harm that was done by this global ideological standoff that lasted decades. Could it be due to short memories?

Well, the African continent was one of the Cold War battlegrounds. My homeland, South Africa, was one of the victims of the Cold War. One of the reasons why it took us longer to end apartheid was because global powers saw our struggle against apartheid in the Cold War lens; Americans viewed Nelson Mandela as a communist and they believed his outlawed political movement, the African National Congress, was funded by Moscow.

The US and Britain were conflicted about the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, hence, when we talk about the history of South Africa's black struggle against apartheid, we should not isolate it from the dynamics of the Cold War.

The Cold War raged on for years in Zaire — now the Democratic Republic of Congo — as the country endured crisis after crisis. The political turmoil that culminated in Patrice Lumumba's

brutal death in 1961, usually called the Congo Crisis, was in part, fuelled by the power struggle between Russia and the US. The corrupt Mobutu Sese Seko who took power in 1965 and ran Zaire to the ground, was supported by the United States for most of his tyrannical rule because he was an ally against the Soviet Union.

The above Cold War cases on South Africa and the DRC, and on many other fronts in Africa, caused enormous political and socioeconomic damage to the continent.

The end of the Cold War put the world in a new, positive direction. A more cooperative world led by the US. The results of the formation of this new world were astonishingly a boon for human progress.

Speedy advancements in technology and globalization have cut global poverty to less than ten percent. Today, most women have the opportunity to go to school, and child mortality has reduced by more than half. Global healthcare has generally improved. Equally, experts seem to agree that we now live in the most peaceful times in modern human history. But it is Africa that still lags behind on fundamental measures of human development in the post-Cold War era.

African countries have failed abysmally to liberalise their economies; they still rank at the bottom of the Heritage's Index of Economic Freedom. Civil conflicts, dictatorships, and corruption have continued unabated. Although global poverty rates may have declined since the early 1990s, Africa's rates remain incredibly high compared to other regions of the world.

Having gone through one of its rough periods in history, Africa needs a pro-market revolution. The revolution needs people that are willing to put their countries first, not their personal interests. Ethiopian Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, recipient of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, is one of the people we must look up to in moving Africa forward. The Cold War is now history. And history is history; there's not much we can do to change it. All we can do is to learn from it and use it as a guide to a better future.