

Public Oration for Dr Mohamed ('Mo') Ibrahim

13 July 2016

Mohamed ('Mo') Ibrahim is an internationally-respected philanthropist, and entrepreneur in mobile telecommunications. He is widely known as one of the world's most influential Africans, providing leadership in order to transform the African continent by placing good governance at the very heart of its development. Achieving B.Sc., M.Sc. and Ph.D degrees in electrical engineering and mobile communications, Dr Ibrahim made his fortune from developing, first, a consultancy, Mobile Systems International and then Celtel, a company which pioneered the use of mobile phones through much of northern and sub-Saharan Africa. Subsequently, having witnessed for himself how poor governance and extensive government corruption actively hinder African development, he has created successively the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Index of African Governance, the Prize for Achievement in African Leadership, and the Ibrahim Leadership Fellowships.

Mo Ibrahim believes in civil society, which he defines as: "Transparency. Lack of corruption. Human rights of individuals. Building infrastructure. Taking care of education. Health. All these things are pillars of a civil society." What prevents these, he says, is "lack of good governance."

As an engineer, businessman and philanthropist, Mo Ibrahim seeks to promote good governance, outstanding leadership and the rise of civil society. His Foundation's Index of African Governance uses data - measurable and directly-comparable information - to rank annually and publically the 57 African countries by their economic, democratic, governance, health, educational and human rights performance. The impact of the Index has been enormous, whether in generating competition and/or co-operation between countries - among African policymakers, not one is unaware of the Ibrahim Index -, or by driving the distribution of aid not on the basis of ideology but on measurable performance. The Foundation's Prize for Achievement in African Leadership consists of a \$5 million initial award, and a \$200,000 annual payment for life to African heads of state who deliver security, health, education and economic development to their constituents **and** democratically transfer power to their successors. Its message is arguably even more powerful in those years when no award is made; indeed, only four awards have been made in the nine years since inauguration of the Prize.

A key player in bringing mobile phones to Africa, Mo Ibrahim's business has contributed directly to the rise of African civil society. Since 1998, the number of mobile phones in Africa has risen from less than 4 million to more than 400 million - nearly half the continent's population. Transformative not only in economic and social communications, mobile phones have enabled civic documentation of voting fraud, brutality by government forces, war crimes...and newly given individuals the ability to obtain information and to self-organise. Mo Ibrahim is proud that citizens in Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, used their mobiles to plan demonstrations and communicate strategy through calls, e-mail, Twitter and Facebook.

Born in Sudan in 1946, and with joint British-Sudanese citizenship, Mo Ibrahim describes himself as Nubian. Nubia lies alongside the River Nile in what is today northern Sudan and southern Egypt. The earliest Nubian business people were trading between Egypt and tropical Africa around 3000 BC; Nubian identity and culture continue to flourish, celebrated in music, story-telling and poetry.

Educated at school in Alexandria, Mo Ibrahim won a scholarship at Alexandria University's Faculty of Engineering. Graduating in 1968, he then worked for Sudan Telecom in Khartoum before moving to England, in 1974, to study for an M.Sc. in electrical engineering at Bradford University. He followed this with a Ph.D. at Birmingham University, where he worked on the then-unfashionable field of mobile communications, specifically on the re-use of radio frequencies.

In 1983, he became a technical director at British Telecom. Winning rapid promotion in BT's mobile division, Ibrahim's group designed the world's first handheld mobile-phone network - paradoxically, a somewhat worrying achievement for a company keen to look after their profitable landline business.

Thus it was, in 1989, that Mo Ibrahim became a 'reluctant entrepreneur', resigning from BT and founding a consultancy, Mobile Systems International - from the dining room of his London home. Within 10 years, MSI had 800 employees, and was advising companies building mobile-communication networks throughout North America, Europe, and Japan.

In 1999, Ibrahim saw that Africa, with its notoriously poor infrastructure and communications, represented a huge potential market for mobile phone use. So, in 2000, he sold MSI (for \$618 million) to Marconi - simultaneously making many of his employees millionaires -, and started a new company, Celtel. He offered cheap prepaid scratch-cards, with cheap call rates, to his sub-Saharan target countries. Negotiating licences and cross-border telecommunications links, Ibrahim met and rebuffed all and any government corruption by insisting that any bribe request was put in writing - a simple but effective deterrent. Within 4 years, Celtel had six million customers in 13 countries. By 2004, its revenues having reached a billion dollars, Celtel was sold, for \$3.4bn.

Mo Ibrahim's ongoing venture to inspire transparency, democracy and development, and the effective 're-branding' of African political leadership, continues apace. Every year for the next ten years, three Mo Ibrahim fellows will be chosen, to be mentored by, and work directly for, the heads of three key institutions—the African Development Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the Economic Commission for Africa. Each fellow will be paid a six-figure salary by the foundation. These organizations, says Ibrahim, "eat our lunch and we don't know how these guys fix things. We want to put our spies in there!".

The impact of his achievements have been recognized with a host of international awards and honours, including the Clinton Global Citizen award (2010); the Millennium Excellence Award for Actions in Africa (2012); the Africare Leadership Award (2013); the Kiel Institute Global Economy Prize (2013); and both the Eisenhower Medal for Distinguished Leadership and Service and the Foreign Policy Association Medal in 2014.

Yet he remains a man known also for his 'unstuffiness'; wishing to be known to everybody as just 'Mo', for example, and dancing the evening away at his Foundation's last Leadership Award, with everybody from Mary Robinson, to the ex-president of Mozambique and the former director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed ElBaradei.

Mo claims to like to play golf but actually, according to son, Hosh, he just uses it to wander round and have deep conversations with people uninterrupted for two and a half hours. Hosh and daughter Hadeel are instrumental in running the Ibrahim Foundation, while three year-old Sami's job is to make his father run around.

I can safely leave the last words to Mohamed ElBaradei, joint Nobel Peace Prize winner, to explain something of his friend's impact on African politics: "They know he does not have a hidden agenda. He's not trying to make money. He's not running for office." Mo Ibrahim, he adds, "has one foot in the East and one foot in the West. He is in many ways a contrarian in Western society, but also in Eastern society".

We are, therefore, Chancellor, presenting to you an exceptional engineer, entrepreneur, and philanthropist. It is a privilege to present to you, on behalf of the Senate, Dr. Mo Ibrahim for conferral of the degree of Doctor of Science, *hon-oris causa*.

Barbara Maher,
University of Lancaster.