10-1-2009

Commencement 2009: Kenyan Prime Minister Urges Solidarity with Emerging Africa

UB Law Forum

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/ub_law_forum

Recommended Citation

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Alumni Publications at Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. It has been accepted for inclusion in UB Law Forum by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ University at Buffalo School of Law. For more information, please contact lawscholar@buffalo.edu.
Two national anthems—those of the United States and Kenya—set the stage for UB Law School’s 120th Commencement, a ceremony with a decidedly international flavor. Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Amolo Odinga delivered the keynote address to the 258 graduating students, and their families, gathered in the Center for the Arts on May 23.

Dean Makau W. Mutua, a native of Kenya who invited Odinga to speak, told the graduates, “Congratulations for having completed and endured three long and

Continued …
Dean Makau W. Mutua, left, presents the Dean's Medal to Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Amolo Odinga.
grueling years of legal education at UB Law School. But if you thought that law school was hard, I ask you to think again, because life begins now. Today begins the rest of your life, but I want to assure you that it will be a wonderful life if you live it under the maxim ‘Equality for all and justice under the law.’ For in that little phrase you will find the tenets of a truly humane existence.”

Odinga began his remarks by saying, “In Kenya, at a graduation time like this, we say, ‘Welcome to the world as it is, not as it should be as expounded in textbooks.’ Whatever you choose to do after this, my word to you is, do not be passive observers of the world. Be active citizens of this planet. Your services as lawyers will be needed beyond the borders of the United States of America.”

He then gave those in attendance a brief history of his country, which in recent years has struggled to overcome a legacy of colonialism and self-interested national governments. He also recounted the Kenyan people’s increasing calls for a new constitution that would limit the power of the executive branch and solidify personal freedoms. “Solving the governance problems in Africa requires fundamental governance reforms,” Odinga said. “Central to these reforms is enactment of a new and popular constitution.”

“WHATEVER YOU CHOOSE TO DO AFTER THIS, MY WORD TO YOU IS, DO NOT BE PASSIVE OBSERVERS OF THE WORLD. BE ACTIVE CITIZENS OF THIS PLANET.”

— Kenyan Prime Minister
— Raila Amolo Odinga

Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Amolo Odinga delivered the keynote address.

Receiving an honorary degree were Irene Zubaida Khan, secretary-general of the international human rights organization Amnesty International, and

Left to right: Pamela D. Heilman ’75 with Kenyan Minister for Lands James Orengo and Kenyan Minister of Education Sally Kosgei
Africa, he said, remains a "great continent with great contradictions ... where the bad and ugly run alongside flashes of brilliance." Some African nations have been independent states for 40, 50, even 60 years, he said, and "the colonial blame game has run its course."

"Africa has been through difficult times in the past," Odinga said. "Africa has been misgoverned and has not been able to marshal the resources that it is. This must not continue. Africa does not need aid. What Africa needs is trade and investment."

Continued...
To the graduating class he had words of exhortation: "I want to encourage you to train your sights on places like Africa and great nations like Kenya. There will be a lot to do in various fields. You could be voices for the rule of law, constitutionalism, democracy, good governance, human rights. As you graduate, you join a world that is in a recession caused partly by poor corporate governance and greed in some cases. You join a world in peril from global warming caused by environmental degradation. Your services are required in these areas across the world. Above all, you graduate at a time when, with the election of President Barack Obama, America is seen to have
rediscovered its capacity to inspire and to give hope. Go out there and inspire the world.”

Following a standing ovation from the audience, Mutua conferred upon Odinga the inaugural Dean’s Award, given to “those individuals who believe in justice and the rule of law.”

Honorary degrees were awarded to one Law School alumnus and one non-alumnus. J. Mason Davis Jr. ’59, of the Birmingham law firm Sirote & Permutt P.C., is the first African-American to practice as a senior partner of a major Alabama law firm.

An Alabama native, he had to come north to Buffalo for law school because African-Americans were denied entrance to all of the schools of the University of Alabama system.

But once he entered practice after his UB Law education, he told the audience, “I handled along with two other lawyers more than 100 lunch counter sit-in cases in Huntsville, and we were fortunate to be successful in all of our cases in the Huntsville city courts and the Birmingham court of appeals. I also handled two of the very early racial discrimination cases in employment in the state of Alabama, and I handled more

Continued...
than 100 voter discrimination cases in both Huntsville and Birmingham.

“These were my favorite, because of my own encounter with discrimination with the three members of the voting board of registrars. In 1958 I had finished my second year in law school, and my mother told me, 'You go down and register to vote.' There was a requirement that you be literate. Well, I went before the three registrars, and they asked me to interpret the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. They didn’t know I had just had a year of Constitutional law. So I started talking, and I talked for about 30 minutes, and by that time the lady who was the chairman of the board said, 'Just a

minute. How do you know all that?' I said, 'If you had read my application, you would have seen that I am a third-year law student at the State University of New York.' The woman slammed her hands on the table and said, 'Oh, hell, just let that n----- vote.'

Also receiving an honorary degree was Irene Zubaida Khan, secretary-general of the international human rights organization Amnesty International.

“I see this award as a recognition of the work that many people around the world are doing for human rights," Khan said. "People
like me who stand as a symbol of large human rights organizations get a lot of recognition. But I see this degree as a recognition of all the men and women who are working around the world, in villages, in remote rural communities, in urban slums, who are fighting for justice for all.”

To the graduates she said, “This is a moment of great challenge. You are going into a world of uncertainty, of an economic crisis but I would say it’s actually a human rights crisis. There is worry about jobs, about homes, but there is also a shortage of clean water, of land, of food, and behind it all a story of deprivation and discrimination, of racism and xenophobia, of insecurity and above all of exclusion – people whose voices are not being heard but who are affected most horrendously by this economic crisis.

You are privileged and empowered with your knowledge to go out there, and the question you must ask is, what are you going to do about it?

“Law is a shield – it protects people – but law is also a sword that we can use to fight with. In whatever you do, stand up for justice.”