

Chief Guest Address by H.E. Benjamin William Mkapa
Convocation of the Aga Khan University
Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 5 February 2020

President Firoz Rasul,
Members of the Board of Trustees of the Aga Khan University, Members of Government and the Diplomatic Corps, Distinguished guests,
And, most importantly, our graduating students:



It is wonderful to be here with you today to celebrate the graduation of the Class of 2019.

It is customary on occasions such as this for speakers to say they are honoured to have been invited. In my case, it is no mere platitude.

For five years, I served on the Aga Khan University's Board of Trustees. I saw the passion of His Highness the Aga Khan and my fellow Board members for improving quality of life in Africa and Asia. When they say the four pillars of AKU are quality, impact, access, and relevance, they mean it. When they say they are committed to educating leaders who make a difference in the lives of others, they mean it. Furthermore, the expansion of the Aga Khan Hospital demonstrates just how committed His Highness the Aga Khan is to investing in Tanzania and its people.

So when I say it is an honour to be here, I mean it.

Graduands, it is my great pleasure to congratulate you on the completion of your degrees. I know your journey was not easy. But if the mountain were not steep, and the climb did not test your resolve, the view would not be such a revelation, or such an inspiration. Now you stand at the peak, and opportunity stretches out before you.

As President Rasul said, convocation is a day when we celebrate your success and look forward to the impact you will have on your students, your patients, your profession, and your country.

I have no doubt that you will positively impact thousands of lives over the course of your careers. I have confidence in your talent, your determination, and the quality of the education you have received.

Nevertheless, I cannot resist the temptation to offer you a few snippets of wisdom. There are qualities you can demonstrate, actions you can take, and attitudes you can adopt that I strongly believe will maximise your success as leaders in the years to come. So please indulge me as I share a few recommendations borne out of my own long experience.

Among the most important lessons I learned from the Father of our Nation is the importance of consulting widely and listening carefully before making decisions.

Whenever he faced a major issue, he sought a wide range of perspectives. He knew he did not have a monopoly on wisdom or virtue. However humble the person, whatever their faults or motives, he would always listen carefully to them, seeking the kernel of truth or insight they had to share.

I have always tried to follow his example in this regard, and my decision-making has undoubtedly been the better for it. We must put the monarchical style of leadership behind us. Its time has passed. Our country is diverse and pluralistic, and our world is even more so. It is only proper that we lead in a consultative manner.

At the same time, once one has listened carefully to the views of both the expert and the common person, the powerful and especially the powerless – then one must be decisive and resolute. One must articulate a course of action and communicate its rationale clearly, both to those who will execute it and those who will be affected by it.

Then comes the hardest part: following through and obtaining results. It is essential to be tenacious, to hold yourself and others accountable for achieving the desired outcome. Too often in my career, I have seen visions propounded, but little done to ensure their enactment. A leader must not be afraid to do the heavy lifting alongside his colleagues, or to do himself what he has asked or advocated others to do.

Early in my career, I was a strong proponent of national service. Yet some criticized me, saying I was asking others to do what I had not done myself. So I went ahead and volunteered for national service, leaving my job for several months to work alongside my fellow Tanzanians. I have always treasured that experience. To see illiterate farmers and university graduates working together was an inspiring reminder of the essential unity of our nation. My service quieted the sceptics. It showed that I was ready to act upon my convictions.

Yet one must not allow conviction to become stubbornness. The world is constantly changing, and when the facts change, we must reconsider our views. It was Mwalimu himself who advocated most strongly for the transition from a single-party state to a multi-party system. He had followed closely the agitation for change that was occurring in other countries, and could sense the early tremors of dissatisfaction in our own.

He said: “We must change ourselves or we will be changed... We will be swept along as if by waves.” As resolute as he was, he remained ready to continue learning, growing and changing with the times.

If there is one thing that I believe has defined my career both within government and outside it, it is concern for the common person. Nothing disturbs me more than to see those who have little victimised by those who have much. At Mwalimu’s memorial service, I said: “Our world is composed of givers and takers. The takers may eat better, but the givers sleep better.” To be a giver is to always remember that one owes a duty to those one serves, however high one rises.

You are teachers and doctors. You have an awesome responsibility. The future of our country depends on the quality of the education you will provide to our youth. It depends on your ability

to prevent needless suffering and to return the sick to health, happiness, and productivity. We need you to extend the benefits of science, knowledge, and technology to those who remain marginalised. Be a giver, not a taker.

As I look back on my career, I can see many turning points. Today, I will single out just one: the moment when Mwalimu called me to his home early in my career. I remember being in awe of him, wondering what business he could possibly have with me. To my great surprise, he asked me to become editor of the party newspaper. I knew next to nothing about running a newspaper. But I realised it was a challenge I could not refuse. I said yes. In many ways, that decision that shaped the rest of my life.

Graduands, do not shrink from a challenge. It is our response to the most difficult tasks that define us. It is the readiness to tackle them that makes a leader.

I would like to end with the quote that closes my memoir, which bears the title *My Life, My Purpose*. Its author is the Rabbi Harold Kushner. He says:

Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter, so the world will at least be a little bit different for our having passed through it.

Graduands, I wish you all the best in your lives and careers. May you live so that your lives matter, and may you make the world a better place for having passed through it.

Thank you.

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