

ASR Focus on Ali A. Mazrui

Introduction

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Born in 1933 in Mombasa, Kenya, Ali Mazrui was sent to England by the government of Kenya in 1955 for his secondary school education, where he stayed on to earn his first degree with distinction from University of Manchester in 1960. His second and third degrees were received, respectively, from Columbia University in 1961 and from Oxford University in 1966. Mazrui taught at Makerere University College, Kampala, Uganda, from 1963 to 1973, at the University of Michigan from 1974 to 1991, and at Binghamton University, New York, from 1991 to 2014.

An avatar of controversy, Ali A. Mazrui is legendary for the fertility of his mind. With clarity, grace, and imagination, he has written and published to date more than forty books and a large number of essays. This is a massive body of knowledge by any measure. In terms of the range of areas he has explored with uncommon flair and in his contributions to scholarship and policy debates, Mazrui has simply no peers in Africa.

In November 2011 we deliberated about Mazrui's intellectual legacy in two roundtables organized in Washington, D.C., in his honor at the 54th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association. We did the same in April 2013 in three roundtables in Binghamton, New York, under the auspices of the 38th Annual Meeting of the New York African Studies Association. After due process, the *African Studies Review* editors selected for this issue two papers from among those presented at the roundtables and submitted to them for consideration. Each paper approaches Mazrui's legacy from a different angle. With this brief introduction, let me use the remaining space to share a generalization or two about the changing themes and unchanging perspective in Mazrui's scholarship.

Although Mazrui stuck to a cultural framework of analysis since he published "On the Concept of 'We Are All Africans'" in 1963, he became

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more focused on it after 1990, subsequent to the publication of his *Cultural Forces in World Politics*. The discipline of political science also opened itself up somewhat following the end of the Cold War, reviving its interest in issues about culture and identity. In 1993 Samuel Huntington formulated his “The Clash of Civilizations” thesis in an article published in *Foreign Affairs*. Mazrui was subsequently invited by the same journal to contribute an article on a related theme. “Islamic and Western Values” by Ali Mazrui subsequently appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in 1997. Mazrui had also debated Huntington in other venues. From his 1997 book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, we learn that Huntington had a high opinion of Mazrui’s “colorful phrases.” Decades earlier, we may recall, Kwame Nkrumah also complimented the “literary effort” in Mazrui’s sharp critique of his policies.

If Mazrui was an articulator of the ideology of global South in the first half of his career, with particular focus on Africa, he became a defender of the ideology of Islam in the second. Mazrui’s Islamic sensitivity reached an acute level in the last decade, after America’s invasion and occupation of two Muslim countries, Iraq and Afghanistan. His public position on this issue drew sharp critiques, particularly as they were expounded more systematically in his 2004 book, *Islam: Between Counter-terrorism and Globalization*. In 2005 a piece in a student newspaper at Binghamton University (reprinted in Adem et al. 2013), Jesse Sabatini even made the claim that Ali Mazrui had links with terrorist organizations. In a response titled “The Younger Face of Bigotry: The New McCarthyites” Mazrui asserted, “I have no connection with any ‘terrorist organization’—unless you regard the present government of the United States [led by George W. Bush] as such [an] organization . . .” (Adem et al. 2013:89).

But how did Ali Mazrui, the expositor of ideology of the global South, become a spokesperson for Islam in the West? The shift in Mazrui’s emphasis was neither unexpected nor sudden. He had come to believe that in contemporary history “negro-phobia” has subsided while “Islamophobia” has increased, rendering the culture line rather than the color line more salient. Although Mazrui’s thought along these lines was formulated earlier, he found additional affirmation of his theory more recently in the election in 2008 (and reelection in 2012) of Barack Obama as the first African American President of the United States. Incidentally, Mazrui was in Kenya when President Obama visited our campus (Binghamton University) on August 23, 2013. Obama and Mazrui thus never met in person, but we sought to make sure that the president would receive in Binghamton Mazrui’s unpublished book-length manuscript, “Barack Obama in Comparative Perspective.”

The issues Mazrui addresses have made him more relevant to academic and public discourse in recent years, but his perspective, divergent as it is from the dominant view, has continued to marginalize him to some extent in the mainstream disciplines and in those on the margins. His “classical” or “traditional” approach, which sometimes allows him to “embed” himself in the

stories he tells, also has not endeared him to many of his more “scientifically oriented” colleagues. Others, mostly “postcolonial” scholars, see Mazrui’s proximity to the corridors of power as the Achilles’ heel of his scholarship. In short, the values Mazrui embraces, the method he espouses, and even some of the audience to whom he addresses himself seem to keep reducing the size of his fan club. But we can be almost certain that Ali Mazrui’s stimulating and substantial intellectual outputs will be put in the limelight of greater scholarly scrutiny in the future.

“I’ve put in so many enigmas and puzzles in my writings that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant and that’s the only way of insuring one’s immortality.” Those lines are from James Joyce, the great Irish writer, not from Ali A. Mazrui. But I would not be surprised in the least if Mazrui had similar thoughts in mind. Whatever the case, the “enigmas and puzzles” in Mazrui’s scholarship (and there are many of them) will, I believe, continue to fascinate us. And that, to me, is also an important aspect of his lasting intellectual legacy.

Thank you, ASR Editors.

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