

Homage to ABDALLA BUJRA

I first met Abdalla in 1973 at the University of Dar es Salaam, where he was professor of Sociology, and then at the CODESRIA headquarters in Dakar, when he had become its new Executive Secretary following Samir Amin. Abdalla was a kind and modest man. His scholarship was outstanding. His main book focused on the Hadhramaut of South Yemen and the diaspora they spawned from the East African coast to Indonesia.

Abdalla was a conscientious and hardworking Executive Secretary whose first thought was how to make sure that CODESRIA would survive lean times. His solution was frugality, to save money to build an endowment, beginning by levying a financial charge on all external funding received by the organisation. The matter came to a head after CODESRIA applied for the next round of funds. When donors carried out an audit, they discovered a pool of unspent money. Their first impulse was to claim that this was evidence of corruption. But the charge would not stick because everyone knew Abdalla to be scrupulously honest. When asked, Abdalla said the money was saved with an eye on how CODESRIA could survive

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rainy days in the future. The donors demanded that the organisation be put under receivership, which would allow them to appoint a new management. In response, Abdalla turned to the membership for ideas on how to save the organisation's independence.

There followed a wide-ranging discussion at the next General Assembly. The loudest voice came from the progressive section of the membership. We argued that since CODESRIA was a membership-based organisation, it was the obligation and prerogative of the membership to forge a response in a crisis situation. It should not be turned by donors into an opportunity to take over the organisation. Faced with overwhelming opposition, the donors agreed to allow the newly elected Executive Committee to salvage the organisation.

I was elected to the new Executive Committee. Along with new members, including our Chair, Claude Ake, we began a protracted discussion with Abdalla Bujra and the lead donors, one that ultimately led to a way forward. It was also a pioneering lesson in self-reliance. When we faced the next institutional crisis, which was more than twenty years later (when I was president of the organisation), we were able to draw inspiration from the 1970s when, along with Abdalla Bujra, we began building the foundation for self-sustainability. It is a fitting tribute to Abdalla Bujra that we acknowledge him today as the pioneering builder of CODESRIA and the architect of its institutional autonomy, which has now lasted over half a century.

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