



KEYNOTE ADDRESS

BY

HIS EXCELLENCY JULIUS MAADA BIO

PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF SIERRA LEONE

ON THE THEME

**“AFRICA IN A SHIFTING GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE:
LEADERSHIP, DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE, AND
STRATEGIC CHOICE”**

JOHN F. KENNEDY JR. FORUM

HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL

TUESDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER 2026

1. **Distinguished Faculty Members, Students, Policymakers and Friends:** Thank you for **welcoming me to Harvard**, and to a forum that carries the name of a family that believed public service is the highest calling of a free people.
2. Let me begin with a date: **27 April 1961**.
3. That morning, the **Union Jack** came down in Freetown, and **Sierra Leone's green, white and blue flag** rose for the first time.
4. **John F. Kennedy** had been President of the United States for just fourteen weeks. Later that year, some of the first **Peace Corps volunteers** arrived in Sierra Leone to teach in our schools.
5. Our countries were looking towards the future with hope. Sixty-five years later, that future is still being shaped.

6. For too long, the world has asked: ***What should we do about Africa?***
7. This evening, I want to ask a different question, beginning with us: **What will Africans do with our growing power?**
8. The **world is changing** around us. **Competition among major powers** is sharpening.
9. **Climate change** is altering where people can live and work.
10. **Artificial intelligence** is transforming economies. **Trust in public institutions** is under strain worldwide.
11. **Africa is central to these changes.** By the middle of this century, one in four people on Earth will be African.

12. Our cities are growing, our resources are vital to new industries, and our young people are building businesses for markets the world has barely begun to understand.
13. The world has noticed. Delegations arrive. Summits multiply. Agreements are announced.
14. But **attention is not influence**. Resources do not automatically become prosperity. A young population does not automatically find opportunity.
15. **Those outcomes depend on choices we make: how we lead, how we govern, and how we engage the world.**

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 16. The first choice for Africa in a shifting geopolitical landscape is to build leadership that outlasts the leader.**
- 17.** I learned something about that in 1996. Sierra Leone was at war, and I was a young soldier serving as Head of State.
- 18.** People I respected argued that the country was too unstable for elections. They urged me to wait until the war was over.
- 19.** I understood their concern. But I also knew that, in politics, **waiting can become never.**
- 20.** Sierra Leoneans voted. I handed power to an elected civilian government, stepped aside, and later returned home to seek office through the ballot. In 2018, Sierra Leoneans elected me President.

21. The decision to hold an election did not end Sierra Leone's civil war. I would not claim that it did.
22. But it affirmed a principle we could build upon: **that even in a time of fear, the people must have a voice in who governs them.**
23. In 1996, I handed over power as a soldier. In 2028, God willing, I will hand it over again as a democrat.
24. That commitment is personal, but the principle is larger than any one person: **power should be passed on, with the country in better condition than it was found.**
25. We should judge leadership by what remains when the leader leaves. **Are institutions stronger? Can children go further than their parents? Do more citizens have the means to shape their own lives?**

- 26.** That is why we placed **Human Capital Development** at the centre of Sierra Leone's **National Development Agenda**.
- 27.** We introduced **Free Quality School Education** because a child's future should not depend on her family's ability to pay school fees.
- 28.** We passed the **Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act** because a country cannot fulfil its potential while holding back half its people.
- 29.** For a parent in Freetown or a village far from the capital, these policies are measured in ordinary questions: **Can my daughter stay in school? Can she learn well? When she finishes, will there be work worthy of her ambition?**

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 30.** Africa's young population is often called a **demographic dividend**. But a dividend is a return on investment.
- 31.** We must earn it through good education, useful skills, and economies where young people can build a future.
- 32.** That includes the ability to shape new technology. African young people should be able to build and apply artificial intelligence to challenges they understand and share in the value they create.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 33.** The second choice for Africa in a shifting geopolitical landscape is **democracy that earns and keeps public trust.**

- 34.** Sierra Leone lived through eleven years of civil war. We know the cost when institutions fail, and political differences turn violent. We also know that peace takes daily work.
- 35. Democracy is under pressure in many parts of the world.** People can lose faith when decisions made in their capitals seem remote from the lives they lead at home.
- 36.** An election gives a government the authority to serve. **Trust must be earned after the votes are counted.**
- 37.** Citizens need justice they can reach, institutions that answer to them, and a fair chance to improve their lives.
- 38. Democratic resilience is tested most severely when an outcome is contested.**

- 39.** In those moments, leaders must protect the institutions that hear grievances, make room for dialogue, and refuse to turn political opponents into enemies.
- 40.** The measure of our commitment is how we behave when trust is hardest to sustain.
- 41.** We must be candid about our failures. **Corruption, exclusion and unconstitutional changes of government have damaged African societies.**
- 42.** In West Africa, the departure of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger from ECOWAS has exposed a serious loss of confidence.
- 43.** I believe the door to their return must remain open. The people of the Sahel still need security, trade and opportunity, as we all do.

44. ECOWAS must earn confidence through what it delivers for its citizens, while defending constitutional order with consistency.

45. If we want a stronger voice abroad, we must strengthen public trust at home.

46. Accountability gives our countries the legitimacy to make difficult decisions and carry them through.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

47. The third choice for Africa in a shifting geopolitical landscape is how we engage the world.

48. Established and emerging powers alike want closer ties with Africa. We welcome partners.

49. But African governments must be clear about what a good partnership achieves.

- 50.** People ask whether Africa will side with East or West. My answer is simple: **AFRICA WILL BE PRO-AFRICA.**
- 51.** We will work with those who help our people build the skills, businesses and industries they need.
- 52.** I apply **four questions** to a proposed partnership: **Does it build skills? Does it create jobs and strengthen local businesses? Does it help us develop industries? Does it leave us better able to make our own decisions?**
- 53.** These questions require us to make choices. A project may promise quick revenue yet create few local jobs.
- 54.** A technology agreement may offer speed yet leave our people unable to maintain what it builds.

- 55.** We must be willing to seek better terms, even when signing quickly would be easier.
- 56.** Consider **critical minerals**. If African resources help power the next global economy, African communities must share in the jobs, knowledge and prosperity it creates.
- 57.** That is a fair expectation of partnership.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 58.** Let me speak directly to our American friends.
- 59.** The relationship between Africa and the United States has been built by people as well as governments: teachers, students, entrepreneurs, researchers and public servants.
- 60.** Today, restrictions on study and travel have narrowed opportunities for exchange, including for Sierra Leoneans.

- 61.** We respect the right of every country to set its policies. We ask that we weigh the value of lasting relationships alongside them.
- 62.** Let us judge our partnership by what we build together: **students able to learn across borders, businesses able to trade, and industries that create value and jobs in Africa.**
- 63.** Those are stronger foundations for friendship than any summit declaration.
- 64.** African countries must also do more together. Leading the ECOWAS Authority for a year has reinforced for me how closely our futures are bound.
- 65. Insecurity crosses borders. Climate shocks cross borders. Trade depends on being able to cross borders.**

- 66.** The **African Continental Free Trade Area** offers a path towards a market of more than a billion people.
- 67.** Its promise will be realised when a producer can move goods across a border without needless delay, and when a business founded in Freetown can grow to serve customers across the continent.
- 68.** Acting together also strengthens Africa's voice in global institutions, including the **United Nations Security Council**, whose membership must better reflect the world it serves.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

- 69.** Before I close, **I want to speak to the students here tonight.**
- 70.** Some of you will enter government.

- 71.** Others will build companies, conduct research, write code or lead organisations whose work reaches far beyond your borders.
- 72.** Wherever you go, **take Africa seriously**. Study its challenges and the solutions Africans are creating.
- 73.** Read African scholars. Work with African institutions.
- 74.** Ask, of every project you undertake: ***Whose knowledge shaped this? Who benefits if it succeeds?***
- 75.** And **to young Africans here and at home: hold your leaders to a high standard, including me.**
- 76.** Bring your skill and integrity to the work of building the continent you want to inherit.

DISTINGUISHED LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

77. I began this evening with a young country in 1961 looking towards the future.

78. My own journey has since taught me how fragile a state can be, what a peaceful transfer of power is worth, and how much patience rebuilding requires.

79. The choices before Africa will be judged by their effect on people's lives: whether a child can learn, whether a young person can build a future, and whether a citizen can disagree with a government without fear.

80. Those are the tests of leadership. They are the substance of democratic resilience. They are the purpose of strategic choice.

81. Africa's future will be shaped by Africans. And the measure of our success will be found in the lives of our people.

THANK YOU.