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**IN THE SHADOW
OF AN ASSASSINATION:**

**ALI A. MAZRUI
AND
THE LEGACY OF WALTER RODNEY**

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Ali A. Mazrui, the Kenya-born political scientist and historian, has been appointed the Walter Rodney Distinguished Professor of the University of Guyana, Georgetown, Guyana, in South America. He is the first incumbent of this special Chair which was created by the late Cheddi Jagan soon after he was elected President of the country. President Jagan died in March 1997.

Dr. Walter Rodney was assassinated in his native Guyana in 1980. He had previously served as a senior Lecturer of History at the University of Dar es Salaam and became one of the most eloquent voices of the Left on campus at a time when that university was a beehive of ideological and intellectual fervor, especially following the Arusha Declaration of 1967.

At that time Dr. Ali Mazrui was based at Makerere University in Uganda, and was widely regarded as the voice of the liberal center (pro-human rights) rather than the socialist left (pro-workers' rights). Partly because of that, Ali Mazrui had a number of highly publicized debates with such Dar es Salaam leftists as Mahmood Mamdani, Issa Shivji, Dan Namudere and others. Most of these confrontations occurred when Mazrui visited the Dar es Salaam campus.

However, by far the most noteworthy debate occurred when Walter Rodney visited Makerere University in 1970 and took on Mazrui at Mazrui's own base. The debate was televised live in Uganda, and caused a stir among both academics and politicians on and off campus. Opinion was divided among the viewers as to who won the debate between Rodney and Mazrui. Many believed that Mazrui had at last met more than his debating match! It was noted that Walter Rodney used no

written notes at all, whereas Mazrui began with notes in the earlier phases of the debate. Those who watched the debate were not likely to forget it. Dr. Joseph Oumo, the geographer, played a supporting role in the debate.

Later in the 1970s Walter Rodney returned to his native Guyana to enter practical politics, and Ali Mazrui went into exile in the United States. When Mazrui was Director of Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, he invited Dr. Walter Rodney to Michigan to give some lectures. The two scholars moved closer together in the Americas than they ever could in East Africa.

And then came the assassination of Walter Rodney in June 1980. Like everybody else, Ali Mazrui was shocked. Mazrui wrote an appreciation of Rodney on behalf of the UNESCO General History Africa. Mazrui's Centre of Afro-American and African Studies at Michigan also named a distinguished graduate fellowship after Walter Rodney. And when Ali Mazrui went to Guyana in 1988 was a guest of President Desmond Hoyte, Mazrui made a public appeal for the restoration of Walter Rodney's name to "national legitimacy." The appeal was made in the President's presence and was broadcast live. Although embarrassed by the appeal, President Hoyte was very gracious to his guest. However, the appeal was applauded by public opinion in Guyana.

Dr. Walter Rodney's most famous book continues to be *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1974), which has been reprinted many times. According to Rodney's book, Europe's colonization of Africa did not result in stimulating

development and growth but in undermining Africa's capacity for autonomous self-development. Professor Mazrui's own position in his BBC Reith Lectures, *The African Condition* (1979) is compatible with Rodney's thesis.

In the mid 1970s Walter Rodney decided to move from writing history to making history — from academic scholarship to political activism. That was when he used his return to Guyana as an occasion for starting a movement for political and economic reforms. It was a fatal step towards his own martyrdom.

Upon creating the Walter Rodney Chair in the 1990s, the late President Cheddi Jagan had written to Professor Mazrui about it. Subsequently the University of Guyana and the Minister of Education invited Mazrui to occupy the Chair at least for a year (1997–1998 year) in order to launch it as a distinguished professorship.

Dr. Mazrui is retaining his positions at Binghamton University and Cornell University in New York. He is also retaining his professorship-at-large at the University of Jos in Nigeria.