

# Linking People, Crossing Borders

A CONVERSATION WITH  
TELECOM PIONEER  
AND PHILANTHROPIST  
MO IBRAHIM



**B**orn in northern Sudan at the end of World War II, educated in England with a Ph.D. in engineering and mobile communications, Mo Ibrahim returned to Africa in 1998, bringing cellular technology with him. At the time of his arrival, there were barely three million landline telephones on the entire continent—the bulk of them in North Africa and the nation of South Africa. Most of sub-Saharan Africa was all but

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inaccessible to terrestrial telephone lines. The Democratic Republic of Congo had only 3,000 phones to serve its population of about 55 million. Seeing demand for mobile phones and with little competition from landlines, Mo Ibrahim created Celtel, beginning in Kenya, branching quickly into Uganda and Tanzania. The company allowed millions of mobile subscribers to roam freely across borders, recharging with local cards as they went. Quickly, Celtel expanded across Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, Malawi, Zambia, and finally his native Sudan—a vast pan-African territory almost devoid of telecommunications boundaries. By the time he sold Celtel five years ago, he had linked 24 million people—a number that was growing exponentially.

Today, Mo, as he insists on being called, encourages the spread of democracy and democratic leadership as chair of the Mo Ibrahim Foundation. The billionaire philanthropist believes his transborder communications system contributes to improved political transparency across Africa and helps the everyday lives of millions. To explain his vision, he talked from Paris with *World Policy Journal* editor David A. Andelman and managing editor Christopher Shay.

**WORLD POLICY JOURNAL:** As part of our examination of borders and boundaries, we'd love to begin by hearing your thoughts on the role the Internet and mobile telecommunications may be playing in rendering traditional borders increasingly obsolete.

**MO IBRAHIM:** It is not so much a question of the legal abolition of borders or a change in the status quo, but what is

happening is the changing nature of cultures. People in this globalized world are acquiring multiple identities. Just to give an example, you have more Manchester United [soccer] fans in Asia than in the UK.

We are really seeing more and more that behaviors are coming closer together. There's a wonderful bridge built by broadband between cultures. I doubt that it will physically bring us closer, because there are other forces working there. We might consider the European project, which was quite successful in bringing peace and security to Europe. Now, it's having difficulties, and even if Europe is extremely well-connected, it is still entrenched sometimes within their own little boundaries.

**WPJ:** Perhaps mobile phones help people on both sides of these borders, who may have been very hostile to each other, to understand each other and thereby make the borders more porous?

**IBRAHIM:** You are correct. Basically, we understand each other much better, because more and more we share with each other. That's why, instead of being seen only as our separate ethnic or religious identities, we are acquiring all these new identities through the face of media and social media. We have new friends, we have built hobbies like Scrabble or Words with Friends, and that's wonderful. It's really a soft power being generated by all this. Hopefully, over time this will help bring people together.

**WPJ:** Is there one region or even one country where this impact has been most intense, either positively or negatively? In your mobile communications empire, you may have seen this quite directly.

**IBRAHIM:** Let's start from the beginning here. What happened was that the first mobile phones liberated the phone from the socket on the wall. And then smart phones, tablets, and iPads liberated the computer from the desk, enhancing usage and innovation because someone is able to carry these devices around all the time—using them not only while sitting at a desk. Increasingly, innovation began to ease mobility. You could define where you are going, the next restaurant, the next place, bus times, and entertainment as well. Suddenly, it created a major social space to connect and do things. All this connected Africa, since Africa was not well-connected before.

The total number of phones in Africa was maybe two or three million fixed-line phones. And this was mainly in South Africa in the south or in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco in the north, and nothing in between. Right now, Africa has more than 550 million mobile subscribers. This is more than the number of mobile phones in Europe, by the way. This brought farmers to the market place. It brought new services. Banking now in Africa is done more with mobiles than in actual physical branches of banks. All kinds of services are available cheap like mobile banking services, which are more used there than in Europe or the United States. It improved elections and democracies. The democratic process improved a lot because of the transparency. It encouraged entrepreneurship and economic growth. So a lot of things happened, especially in a place like Africa, which badly needed that kind of service which bridged so many years of underdevelopment, and that is wonderful. With information at their fingertips, people are able to communicate, able to talk to each other. This should bring a better

sense of understanding and less conflict. I don't think the Arab Spring could have been possible so soon without mobile phones and social media.

**WPJ:** Reflecting on the role mobile phones and social media played in the Arab Spring, do you now see a sub-Saharan African Spring?

**IBRAHIM:** An African Spring is happening already. Maybe not in the same way as it's happening in the north [of Africa], but we can see much better elections taking place in Africa already. Don't forget that while the north of Africa was more developed than sub-Saharan Africa in terms of infrastructure and education, it was more backward when it came to political freedoms, inclusive voices, mechanisms, all kinds of corruption.

It was far worse actually than the rest of Africa. We did measure all these things with the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, and North Africa was worse in the areas of democracy, transparency, and participation. So

in the rest of Africa, many of the countries already had their Springs. It did not come like a tsunami, rather it was more a succession of waves. We can see a lot of truly democratic elections in Africa in at least 30 countries—really peaceful transitions of power taking place now.

A lot of that actually is being supported by this new social media. Don't forget how we knew there was a problem in the election in Zimbabwe. We knew it because people used mobile phones to photograph

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the results in each polling station. So people were able to aggregate and knew the results way before the government declared it. It has become impossible to falsify the outcome. So social media actually enhances transparency and accountability. You know

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you have to be careful what you do, because people can have your picture anytime. We're all naked now in the light of this new social media. It forces people to behave better.

**WPJ:** Many of these boundaries were formed in the colonial era that has been outpaced by history. I

would like you to talk about new advances that you think will facilitate regional unions or cross-border cooperation and understanding.

**IBRAHIM:** In Africa, projects for regional integration are forging ahead. We started in Africa what we call regional economic communities, so each African community is moving toward a union. The unions here started as economic unions, by creating free trade areas, by allowing free movement of people, goods, and capital. And that is the right way to do it. It's not necessarily by political union. It really starts with economic integration. In West Africa, ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States] already produced an ECOWAS passport for the West African countries. They have one central bank. So we are moving toward this union.

What is still missing, of course, is the infrastructure to support them. By infrastructure, we mean material infrastructure

like highways to connect countries, but also broadband to connect people. Highways and broadband are almost the same. Roads to travel across and broadband to communicate with each other need to be built. It's a priority for us. We are moving together, maybe not as fast as we wish to, but we are moving toward it. We actually need to give it a kick in the butt to make sure it moves a bit faster.

**WPJ:** Now that pace of change you talk about is very interesting. Do you think the people of many of these areas are fully prepared for the changes of such an introduction to the modern world?

**IBRAHIM:** Once people find an application or a tool that really meets one of their basic needs, they take to it like there's no tomorrow. I will give you an example. I was the technical director of a British telecommunication company. We introduced mobile phones to the UK in 1985. When our marketing and business people were calculating what sort of customers we might have, they were totally wrong. We thought our first adopters were going to be business people, executives, bankers, but actually, the most significant first set of users were plumbers—handymen walking around, taking orders, going from house to house. These were the first adopters, because it was essential for their work. They were able to finish a job and move straight to another job. They could take orders and inform customers when they would be coming. Finally they had found a tool, which they always needed but were never able to articulate what exactly it was. What actually happened was, this fulfilled a need. If you offer a product or a tool which people really need, it changes, it increases efficiency, solves a major social problem for them. They adopt it in no time.

**WPJ:** You've talked about how mobile technologies improves governance, but does increasing access to mobile communications necessarily push a country toward greater freedom and transparency, or are there also potential dangers that go along with widespread use of mobile technologies?

**IBRAHIM:** Absolutely nothing enhances democracy and accountability and transparency more than giving voice and information to everybody in the country. You have to remember, when I grew up in Africa, in my country, we had one radio station run by the government. We had one TV station run by the government. There were three newspapers—two of them were run by the government. If you wanted to buy a photocopier, you needed to get permission from the police. It was like a weapon of mass destruction—seriously, to get a photocopier. That's what we had before. Why? Because information is dangerous, and the government thinks it must control it. They must control what we read, what we hear, and what we see. Even if you could get a photocopier, you could not use it, because we were not allowed to disseminate any views or information that did not come from the government.

Now with mobile technologies, everybody walking in the street is a radio station and a TV station and a studio. People take photographs and shoot videos, sending it on the web, sending magazines to their friend. Suddenly, there is nothing to hide anymore. That is transparency, and that's really important because transparency has given a voice to the people. Really that is what builds democracy. That is the first part. The second part is that all these capabilities are also available to terrorists and criminals. Terrorist, also criminal, activity now is getting more serious because

all our networks, our banking systems, even our infrastructures suddenly become vulnerable to threats. Cyber threats can be a major problem for us going forward.

**WPJ:** What suggestions would you offer world leaders on how best to integrate these new technologies into societies and across borders to make this world better?

**IBRAHIM:** We need to draw attention to the need for innovation, integration, and connecting people. There is a need to facilitate development and building of broadband. We need infrastructure. Unfortunately, we still think of highways and roads, and airports. But we need to think now of something else, which is broadband, and that is as essential because that can develop very quickly. The private sector is doing this, but we need to make that easier and more attractive for the private sector to do it.

I also think our education system really needs a fresh look, because I am not sure we are teaching our kids all the skills needed for the next 20 or 30 years. Industry is changing, technology is changing, the job market is changing, and we really need to reexamine what we are doing in the area of education.

**WPJ:** What do you hope to accomplish with the Mo Ibrahim Prize for Achievement in African Leadership—a \$5 million dollar prize, with \$200,000 per year for life for the winner?

**IBRAHIM:** We've awarded three prizes in six years. We gave it to Joaquim Chissano, of Mozambique, then to Festus Mogae of Botswana and then Pedro Pires of Cape Verde. The prize is awarded by the prize committee, which I am not a member of.

We are about good governance. To be eligible, the people have to be elected democratically, lead democratically, leave democratically, and move their country forward. They have to stand up and make some tough decisions, because it is also about leadership. It's a prize for excellence. It's not a pension. Some years, by the way, we have three or four presidents who leave power. Some years, nobody leaves office. It's hard to be deemed excellent, but that is the value of the credibility of the prize. That's why it has been awarded only three times in six years.

**WPJ:** Basically, then, good governance is the goal. So to conclude, how exactly can mobile technology improve governance?

**IBRAHIM:** It improves transparency, it improves access to information, and it gives people a voice. For the first time, our leaders are becoming accountable. They are not used to it. We are dealing with people who believe they are born to lead, who don't want to leave power. There are people who stay for 30 or 40 years. Fortunately, that number is dwindling now, but suddenly everything is being questioned. By giving voice to people who were not able to communicate with each other totally has impact on public opinion. And that public opinion can give rise, then, to action. And then suddenly, people go into Tahrir Square or in Tunis, and it becomes a real democracy. ●