

Remembering a friend of East Africa



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In Summary

- Prof Barkan died on January 10, while on a family vacation in Mexico City. He was an empathetic friend of East Africa where he carried out most of his research work since the 1960s.

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Joel D Barkan was a senior associate at the US-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He was an internationally recognised expert on Africa, East Africa and Kenya in particular.

Prof Barkan died on January 10, while on a family vacation in Mexico City. He was an empathetic friend of East Africa where he carried out most of his research work since the 1960s.

Throughout his academic and research life in the region, he was always keen to collaborate with locally-based scholars.

The combination of field work and statistics based analyses yielded enviable knowledge of East African political economies — knowledge that often found its way into policy advice reports for governments and development agencies.

He transformed into an activist for democracy from 1992 when he served as the first advisor on Democracy and Governance at the US Agency for International Development (USAid).

He worked with some of us in local institutions such as the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, and the Institute of Policy Analysis and Research.

He was instrumental in establishing an exchange programme between the University of Iowa, where he taught for many decades, and the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi, where he spent some of his earlier years in East Africa.

More recently, Prof Barkan debated the issue of the International Criminal Court intervention in Kenya and its implications for the country's international image and reputation.

He argued that the matter required a candid debate because it has the potential of unravelling Kenya's tortuous journey in democratic transition. But he also wondered whether the ICC debate was doing justice to what is Kenya's complex political life.

During recent fieldwork in Kenya, we began meditating on the role of Africanists in the West.

He observed that the primary responsibility for explaining Africa to the West lay with Africans themselves. He further observed that the governments in the West had started creating brick walls — they had become difficult to advise.

Away from public life, we shall remember Prof Barkan for making enormous efforts to get to know us as individuals and family members.

He would always make a point of visiting our homes whenever he was in the region. Equally, his home in Washington DC had become the first point of call for us. We shall miss him as a scholar, an activist and a family friend.

Professors Njuguna Ng'ethe and Karuti Kanyinga teach at the Institute for Development Studies, University of Nairobi