



Pride of Tanzania

DESPITE BEING AFRICA'S YOUNGEST BILLIONAIRE, Mohammed Dewji used to move about Dar es Salaam without security. Then one morning last October as he arrived at a hotel for a workout in its gym, he was kidnapped by a group of armed men.

During the 10 days in which his fate was unknown, an extraordinary thing happened. At a time of growing global unease over income inequality, and in a country racked with poverty, throngs of ordinary people took to the streets and to social media to pray for the safe return of Mr. Dewji, Tanzania's wealthiest man and largest private employer. Ultimately, his captors released him.

"I thank Allah that I have returned home safely,"

MOHAMMED DEWJI, who grew his father's business into his nation's largest private employer, tells Brunswick's CRAIG MULLANEY of his gratitude toward his countrymen.

Mr. Dewji wrote last October on Twitter. "I thank all my fellow Tanzanians, and everyone around the world for their prayers. I thank the authorities of Tanzania, including the Police Force for working my safe return."

In an interview with the Brunswick Review, Mr. Dewji tells Brunswick Partner Craig Mullaney that the experience tempered his ambition for ever-mounting wealth and strengthened his commitment to philanthropy, especially in his native land. "The poorest of the poor stood up for me, they prayed for me. It was unbelievable. It was the best feeling," said Mr. Dewji, who is 43.

That reaction reflects the outsized role Mr. Dewji has played in spurring the economy of Tanzania,

an East African country of 55 million. After joining his father's commodities trading company about 20 years ago, he began purchasing and reviving distressed state-owned companies, in the process creating tens of thousands of Tanzanian jobs. Revenue from the company, called Mohammed Enterprises Tanzania Limited, grew to \$1.5 billion from \$30 million. MeTL operations include the manufacturing of textiles, soaps and other products once available in Tanzania primarily through imports.

As he became a well-known business leader, gracing the cover of Forbes magazine in 2013, he remained visible and accessible, taking selfies with anyone who asked, in his trademark tailored suits and fashionable eyeglasses. He became one of the most prominent business influencers on social media, where he connects with more than 2 million followers across Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. In fact, his account on Instagram was the third most engaging among business leaders globally in February, placing him ahead of even Bill Gates. He also served 10 years in Tanzania's Parliament, where among other achievements he dramatically increased his constituency's access to clean water and education. Finally, his investment in a local soccer club has made him something of a local sports hero.

This stature in his homeland isn't what he envisioned during his college days at Georgetown University, where amid the pursuit of a bachelor's degree in international business and finance he got swept up in the romance of Wall Street. "Most of my peers were looking forward to going to Wall Street, and so was I," he tells the Review.

But when his research showed that starting salaries on Wall Street would make for hard-scrabble living in high-priced New York, he called his father for help. "At university the last couple of years, I was living quite a comfortable life. I had my own car, et cetera. So I called my father back in Tanzania and said, 'Can you at least help me so I can live in a nice place and live comfortably in New York?'" His father said no. "He said he believed that there were big opportunities back home. He said, 'Why don't you come back to Dar?'"

Having worked for his father since childhood, Mr. Dewji wasn't opposed to the idea.

"As much as I wanted to work on Wall Street, I thought that I would make a bigger difference if I came back to Tanzania."

He rises at 5 a.m., prays and runs five miles. Arriving at the office at 6:15, he clears out his email inbox before 7:30. Then, meetings. After a weight-training workout around noon, he returns home for lunch

"OVERALL
THE EXPERIENCE
MADE ME A
BETTER PERSON ...
[AND] BROUGHT
ME MUCH
CLOSER TO GOD."

with his family, then back to the office for meetings that last well into the evening.

You once joked about becoming the richest man in Africa. Is that really a goal?

If that ever was my agenda, it's not now, after the ordeal I had.

What helped you get through that trial? How did it change you?

I was blindfolded for nine days with both my hands and legs tied. When you can't see anything and you're not sure what's going to happen to you, it is tough. I was doing principally three things.

I was praying, may God save me. When you do that, you think, there's so many people dying in tragedies and accidents. Why would God want to listen to me? I'm just nobody. But even so, you pray, number one.

Besides my major in international business and finance, I'm also a theology minor. So number two, you start thinking how you have sinned in this world. You might have hurt someone, insulted someone. Maybe you didn't fast or pray on time. So I was repenting all the things I could have done better.

Number three, I reflected on what I should do differently. I'd been in the rat race, running all the time, accumulating wealth and trying to build and build and build.

I reflected on my kids. I have a 15-year-old. In three years, she's going off to university. The last 10 years, I hadn't spent an abundance of time with my kids. I've got two young boys. I wasn't spending enough time with them.

Overall, the experience has made me a better person. As a Muslim, when you go through a difficult time, how do you know if God is testing you or punishing you? The answer is that what takes you closer to God is a test. What takes you away from God is a punishment. This experience brought me much closer to God.

My priorities are not just more dollars any more. My priority is not just about building an empire anymore. I spend more time with my children. And I am deeply focused on giving back.

I signed the Giving Pledge [which encourages the world's richest individuals to commit half of their wealth to philanthropy, launched in 2010 by Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett]. I'm spending more and more time on philanthropy. It's changed me that way. Most importantly, if you followed the Tanzanian media, the Tanzanians, they stood up for me.

This is something that really, really touched me. I am forever going to be indebted and grateful to these people. Political differences often divide people. I'm not an indigenous Tanzanian, and that can divide people. Religion can divide people. In Third World countries, the greatest division is between the haves and have nots.

In a country where poor people are struggling to make ends meet, there isn't much thought for the rich, rich man who encounters a problem. But I'll tell you something: Tanzania came to a standstill when I was kidnapped. I'm forever indebted to my countrymen.

Did it help that you have invested so much time in connecting to people through social media?

For sure. I feel that I need to be connected in the sense that I give hope to people. I'm the largest employer, after the government, in Tanzania. I need to act like a leader to the youngsters of Tanzania.

They need to know that I want to share this wealth I've accumulated. I bought a football club. It brings happiness to millions of people. And I think they know that that club is burning cash. It is burning a lot of cash. But it brings people closer together.

The ruling elite, the wealthiest people in any country, are often seen as remote. They're caught by photographers as they walk from their limousine to their private plane. Has social media given everyone access to you?

Yes. But also, I'm very approachable. People randomly ask me for selfies and I never refuse. If somebody asked for advice, I would never refuse. Respecting people is very important. That is something that my parents taught me from a very, very young age.

Do you now travel with a security person?

Yeah, my life changed. I'm moving around with armed people all the time.

It must be inspiring for people here to see one of their own do as well as you have.

Yes. I think they also see that I am giving back and that opportunity is growing for everyone.

I gather from reading the local media that there's also an appreciation for how well you dress.

It's the only thing I do well. It's something that grew on me when I was in the US. But actually, I think I dress normally for a business person except for my glasses. I have a fetish for glasses. People take note of that.

**"OVER THE LAST
10 YEARS WE'VE
BEEN ONE OF THE
10
FASTEST-GROWING
ECONOMIES
IN AFRICA, WITH
AN AVERAGE GDP
GROWTH OF
7 PERCENT."**

Do you see a new generation of billionaires emerging from Tanzania?

I think that's true not only in Tanzania, but Africa in general. In the next five to 10 years, there's definitely going to be more billionaires out of Tanzania and Africa.

What would you like the global business community to know about your nation's economic potential?

It's got eight countries neighboring it. It's a corridor of eastern central Africa. From Tanzania you can access Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the DRC, Malawi and Mozambique. We're probably the fastest growing in terms of population growth in the world. We are rich with resources: gold, diamonds, agricultural products, coffee, sesame seeds. Iron, coal and natural gas. Tourism is huge. We've got Mount Kilimanjaro, the Serengeti, the Ngorongoro. If you look at all the variables, they add up. Over the last 10 years, we've been one of the 10 fastest growing economies in Africa, with an average GDP growth of 7 percent. Inflation is controlled. Tanzania is one of highest recipients of foreign direct investment in the whole of eastern central Africa.

We've got political stability. Every five years, we have elections. We've got a two-term limit for the president. After that, there's a proper stepping down process, a transfer of power. We have no racism. Our people are very, very good people. We don't have any religious tension. Everybody practices their own religion freely.

Who are your heroes or mentors in the global business community?

I've got two heroes. I would not be where I am without my father. People have asked, "Who's smarter, you or your father?" My father didn't have money. My family didn't. He is a self-made man. It is far more difficult to make a million than a billion. It's easier to multiply money than to make money out of nothing. At 70, this man is still very disciplined. He is my hero.

The other is Bill Gates. I'm trying to follow his footsteps. I want eventually to step down and just focus on philanthropy, like Bill has. He came here once, to Tanzania, and we had a chat and we meet other times at the Giving Pledge, and I ask him questions about his transition and how he did it and what he's doing. ♦

.....
CRAIG MULLANEY, a digital media executive, bestselling author and decorated Army combat veteran, is a Partner in Brunswick's Washington, DC office.