

ASR FORUM

Africa in the Age of Obama

Putting Africa's House in Order to Deal with Developmental Challenges

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However proud Africans must be to have a person of African descent in the White House, they should have no illusions as to how much President Barack Hussein Obama can do for Africa. Africans must put their own house in order for purposes of dealing successfully with the major challenges facing the continent, the most important of which is that of democratic and developmental governance. Obama's priorities are not necessarily those of Africans. They have to do with the role of the United States as a superpower in a global system in which the American military and business corporations play a hegemonic role. In this context, Africa is relevant to American and Obama's global priorities when its resources are needed to strengthen this role, on the one hand, or its humanitarian crises are likely to affect them in an adverse manner, on the other.

What are these global priorities, and how are they likely to affect Africa during Obama's tenure? Following is a brief examination of four major priorities. The first is limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. Operating on the premise that nuclear weapons should be limited to the few

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countries now possessing them (U.S., Russia, Britain, France, China, Israel, India, and Pakistan), the U.S. government has led an international campaign against the acquisition of nuclear weapons technology by other countries, particularly those deemed hostile to Western interests, such as Iran and North Korea. Since South Africa destroyed the nuclear arsenal of the former apartheid state and Libya gave up its nuclear ambitions, the only relevant issue with respect to Africa's role in the spread of nuclear weapons is the question of who has access to Africa's abundant supply of uranium. Denying access to African uranium to "rogue states" and terrorist organizations is an important foreign policy objective of any American government, including the Obama administration.

The second priority is the fight against international terrorism. Even before the tragedy of September 11, 2001, the defining moment in the war between the United States and the Al Qaeda organization of Osama Bin Laden, Africa had already become an important battlefield in this confrontation—beginning with the 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Dar es Salaam and Nairobi. Today the Al Qaeda conglomeration seems to be establishing a footing in the sands of the Sahel, with Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb kidnapping and/or killing Western tourists in Mauritania, Mali, and Niger, and the militant Al Shabab ("the youth") of Somalia operating as an ally of Yemen-based Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Under these circumstances, U.S. policymakers' concerns that failed states like Somalia could become fertile grounds for terrorist groups can explain increased American military and intelligence presence in Africa. This is a major reason for the establishment of AFRICOM.

The third major priority is stabilizing the world economy in the interest of American businesses and consumers. This is perhaps the most difficult of the tasks facing President Obama, as he must at the same time ensure the profitability of major American corporations in the world economy and implement his domestic agenda for well-paying jobs, secure home ownership, and affordable health care. Here, as in the first two cases, the only benefits to Africans are indirect, in the form of payments for African goods and services and the infrastructure built for certain economic activities such as oil extraction. However, as a major source of small arms sold in Africa, the U.S. economy is also a factor of death and destruction rather than life and development in Africa. There is no indication that stopping the proliferation of small arms in Africa is a major policy objective of the Obama administration.

The fourth and final major U.S. global priority is dealing with humanitarian disasters in order to mitigate their adverse consequences for U.S. and Western interests. If it is true that history and tradition are instrumental in the role that the U.S. government plays in support of or alongside religious and charity groups in disaster relief, humanitarian intervention in itself is inevitably political. For it is done to prevent the crisis from giving rise to fragile or failed states, large numbers of refugees and internally displaced

persons, and health emergencies likely to spread contagious diseases internationally. Africa has had its share of major humanitarian disasters during the last fifty years, and the U.S. role in each of these events has been consistent with the overall global policy objectives of the American establishment. Mr. Obama is not likely to change this pattern.

These four global priorities are the invariants of U.S. foreign policy and the parameters within which any Africa policy of the Obama administration is to be understood. Given this reality, what do Africans have to do to put their house in order for purposes of dealing effectively with the challenges of the twenty-first century? In the first place, Africans must understand the four major challenges confronting the continent today: (1) the challenge of basic human rights and liberties, including the right to food (adequate nutrition), clean water, primary health care, basic education, civic liberties, and safety and security; (2) the challenge of sustainable peace, or living without armed conflict in any shape or form, including intercommunal violence, ethnic cleansing, cross-border wars, etc.; (3) the challenge of sustainable development, or meeting the people's aspirations for enjoying life and enjoying it more abundantly by using Africa's wealth in natural resources to improve the quality of life of its people, and creating more economic opportunities to stop the brain and youth drain to the outside world; and (4) the challenge of democratic and developmental governance, or meeting the people's aspirations for the transformation of the inherited structures of the state and the economy to serve the interests of African workers and peasants through more participatory and wealth-creating institutions.

Of these four challenges, it is evident that the last one is the most important, because without it the first three are not possible. During both the independence struggles of the 1950s and the democracy movements of the early 1990s, most people expected that political change would usher in a new era of freedom and material prosperity. These early "expectations of independence," and more recently, dreams of "democracy dividends," were quickly swept away by the politics-as-usual behavior of the new rulers: the African elite who replaced the European colonialists but became "the new whites" in the minds of ordinary people; and the "democratically elected leaders" who altered constitutions and electoral laws to cling to power just as their predecessors had done.

The hope in Africa is that governments claiming to have the interests of the African people at heart, as Obama's administration does, will support the continent's popular struggles for democracy. That implies upholding the same yardstick for all regimes, and not employing double standards or playing favorites with strategic allies. For example, the regime of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak is notorious in its violation of human rights and its conduct of fraudulent elections, and yet Washington is extremely timid in pressuring its ally on this matter. In his Cairo address to the Muslim world, President Obama had little to say about democracy in Egypt.

Likewise, the U.S. commitment to peace and security will continue to

ring hollow as long as the United States remains a major source of the small arms that continue to wreak havoc in resource conflicts across the African continent. Strong and enforceable measures to stop the proliferation of small arms in Africa can succeed only if similar measures are undertaken at the source, by dealing severely with those who manufacture and ship these arms to Africa.

A similar observation must be made concerning corruption and capital flight. Billions of dollars leave Africa each year for the tax heavens of Switzerland, Luxemburg, and the Caribbean. Now that the United States has succeeded in compelling Switzerland to waive its bank secrecy laws for rich American tax cheaters, it is time for the U.S. and the international community to prevail on this and for other countries engaging in similar practices to start repatriating to Africa the billions of dollars that corrupt rulers have stashed there. Failure to do so can only perpetuate corrupt practices and is inimical to the goal of establishing strong developmental states in Africa.

Thus, rather than asking President Barack Obama to provide resources to Africa, what Africa needs from him is consistent support for democratic and developmental governance. If Africa is governed by democratically elected leaders who are legitimate, accountable, and responsive to the needs of their citizens, and who use the country's resources to improve the living conditions of their people rather than for their own selfish interests, Africa will be able to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century and to enjoy sustainable peace and development. It will stop being a perpetual ward of the international community.

Reference

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