

ASR FORUM

Africa in the Age of Obama

Can We Expect More than Symbolic Support?

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Africa and the Obama Phenomenon

When I think about the extraordinary writing and speaking phenomenon by the name of Barack Obama, who also happens to be the President of the United States of America, the most powerful country in the world, I can't help asking myself, what can he do for Africa? I ask this not only because he is a son of Africa, but also because I hear in his speeches the words of a man deeply committed to human values, and therefore concerned with the predicament of Africa's people in this age of globalization.

As the first African American elected to the American presidency, Obama represents an extraordinary symbolic change in American politics. No one can underestimate the symbolic significance of his election. Nor should it be considered purely a matter of symbolism; a changing of the guard at the top necessarily involves—or should involve—implications of

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substantive change. There is the rub—can we expect substantive change of any significance from his election, given the nature and structure of American politics and society?

In connection with that question it is fair to ask: what does the Age of Obama portend for Africa? Two related questions arise concerning this: first, what should Obama do for Africa, and second, what can he do for Africa? As to the first question, what Obama should do for Africa is linked to Africa's need; and we can spend a whole day talking about that and not exhaust it. On the basis of Obama's speeches, including especially his Accra speech of July 11, 2009, and our own sense of Africa's needs, I offer three primary talking points that embrace a set of values or goals upon which all government systems should be based. The first is peace and stability, the second is sustainable economic development and social justice, and the third is democracy and good governance—not necessarily in that order.

These core values or primary goals are related and interdependent. Peace is a primordial requirement for human life and for sustainable development, as are democracy and good governance. To be sustainable or enduring, peace must be based on justice. And we may fulfill that requirement by reference to good governance: by expanding the meaning of good governance. In his Accra speech Obama expressed his firm belief that progress depends on good governance—that progress on good governance is what can unlock African's potential. Good governance speaks to the integrity of those who govern: it means the absence of corruption and the meticulous response to the needs and aspirations of the people. Linking the absence of corruption to development, Obama contended that no country can create wealth if its leaders exploit the economy to enrich themselves, or if police can be bought off by drug traffickers. "No person wants to live in a society," Obama said, "where the rule of law gives way to the rule of brutality and bribery." Calling for an end to corruption and tyranny, he charged that "Africa doesn't need strongmen, it needs strong institutions."

With regard to peace, Obama said that Africa is not the crude caricature of a continent at war. Peace, of course, is not simply the absence of war, but the absence of the threat of violence. "But...for far too many Africans," Obama declared, "conflict is a part of life.... And it is still far too easy for those without conscience to manipulate whole communities into fighting among faiths and tribes." For those of us from the Horn of Africa and Democratic Republic of the Congo, that statement certainly hits home; it is a painful reminder of the harsh predicament faced by the peoples of our region.

Obama's Critics, Africa, and Globalization

Some Obama critics have faulted him for not highlighting the role of the West in the spread of corruption in Africa. They contend that the greed of corrupt African leaders was imported from Wall Street and the City of Lon-

don. They also fault him for not sufficiently underscoring the historic wrong committed by Europe in regard to African slavery and colonial rule. Obama's fine rhetoric, they say, is not matched by sufficient policy pronouncement concerning the ways America can help Africa rectify past wrongs and achieve sustainable development. Gerald Caplan (2009) was particularly harsh in his condemnation of Obama's failure to deliver the goods. Writing for *The Nation*, Caplan asserted that except for the eloquence, there was nothing in Obama's Accra speech that could not have been said by George W. Bush. I call this ideological overkill. Caplan also insisted that the president read his own book, *The Betrayal of Africa* (2008), in order to learn more about the continent. Personally, I find this brazen as well as naive.

In the summer and fall of 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spent a significant amount of time visiting seven African countries, including some, like the Democratic Republic of Congo, that are beset by deadly conflicts. During those visits Clinton encouraged the "good guys," promising all manner of incentives, and threatened the "bad guys" with unstated sanctions if they did not mend their ways. Such carrots and sticks must be pursued with seriousness and consistency. Clinton has made good on her threat in the case of the Eritrean regime of Isaias Afewerki, who has defied appeals to cease support for Islamic extremists in Somalia. In that case, American pronouncements were bolstered by those of the African Union and the Horn of Africa's Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), and followed by selective U.N. sanctions against the Eritrean government that targeted the purchase or sale of arms, prohibited the granting of travel visas to the principal officers of the government, and froze their assets.

Africa in the Age of Obama is also the age of globalization. In his Accra speech Obama told his audience that "the twenty-first century will be shaped by what happens not just in Rome or Moscow or Washington, but by what happens in Accra as well." He was not flattering his Ghanaian audience, though some among them might have been flattered, or more likely, confused. He was referring to the interconnectedness of the globalized world in which we live. The reality is that in much of Africa the effect of globalization has not been salutary; quite the contrary. Today, as before, the United States, Europe, and more recently, China, are interested only in exploiting the energy and mineral resources of the continent. America's deeds do not match its rhetoric about sustainable development. A cursory look at figures on imports, exports, and investment between America and Africa demonstrates this beyond question. Aside from the exploitation of African energy and mineral resources, the American preoccupation since September 11, 2001, has been countering Islamic extremists. A new and equally challenging preoccupation concerns competition with China. The latest figures show China catching up—and in some cases surpassing—the United States and Europe in import–export trade and investment in many African countries. Some may see poetic justice in the fact that the Wash-

ington Consensus and its neoliberal ideology is being challenged by the Beijing Colossus, to coin a phrase.

Obama's promise that the United States will support strong and sustainable development in Africa is premised on a firm belief—first articulated in his June 4, 2009, Cairo speech—that governments that respect the will of their own people are more prosperous, more stable, and more successful than governments that do not. Clearly, with the advent of China and its serious challenges, it is not only in trade and investment that the West will be tested. The question arises as to whether the West will insist on imposing the same terms and conditions, including good governance, in the face of China's pursuit of its own national interests irrespective of its impact on hard-won values like democracy and the rule of law. At a time of a global recession, China, as the largest creditor of the United States, holds a trump card in the global contention for economic dominance. According to Deputy Secretary of State James B. Steinberg, China "must reassure the rest of the world that its development and growing global role will not come at the expense of the security and well-being of others" (Steinberg 2009). Time will tell if the Chinese will accept what Steinberg terms this "strategic reassurance." From the perspective of Africa, the question is: what can the Chinese offer that the rest of the world cannot or will not offer? Can Africa turn the rise of China and its challenge to the West to its advantage? Will the West, and especially the United States under Obama, respond positively to Africa's demands? What are these demands and what can Obama do, particularly in view of the recent setbacks that he and his Democratic Party have suffered?

Postcrisis Reality

These remarks were conceived at a time of historic transformation. Obama's election was historic, and when he was inaugurated Obama was viewed as a transformational president. That moment of magic seems to have gone. Unfortunately for Obama and for what his election seemed to promise—including a better deal for Africa under his administration—he and his party have recently suffered serious setbacks. The defeat of the Democratic Party candidate who ran to fill the seat left vacant by the death of Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy changed the electoral equation. That defeat altered U.S. congressional politics, posing an unexpected threat to Obama's legislative agenda, including his flagship program, comprehensive health care reform. The election of a Republican senator in the place of the pioneering Democratic health care reformer rendered the passage of comprehensive health care reform legislation much more difficult. With Republicans vowing to block its passage and some recalcitrant Democrats creating roadblocks and altering key elements of the original bill, a much changed version squeaked through without bipartisan support. The success of Obama's presidency was predicated on the passage of the comprehensive

health care reform legislation. Its defeat or indefinite postponement would have cast doubt on the prospects of Obama's other policies and programs. John Podesta, a former presidential aide, recently argued that Obama has lost control "of the political narrative" and suggests that he needs to make greater use of his immense electoral popularity and his able cabinet "to regain" the lost narrative (Luce 2010).

What can Obama do to help Africa, given the circumstances of his recent setback and the opposition of aroused right-wing Republicans muddying the waters? First, let us be clear about one thing—the U.S. president is sworn to preserve, protect, and promote the interests of the United States in all circumstances. Even Obama, a son of Africa, cannot do anything that adversely affects American interests. What one may expect from Obama in normal circumstances—everything else being equal—is to give a fair hearing and sympathy to African demands, to be more responsive perhaps than George W. Bush was. That said, American interests trump all else. The recent tragedy of Haiti offers a sobering lesson in that regard. Although the response of the United States to the humanitarian disaster there is laudable, one wonders how long it will be sustained. Also, will the injustice that Haiti suffered at the hands of the U.S. government in the past be rectified? Will the democratically elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, whom the United States deposed and forcibly exiled, be restored to his rightful place? Will the fund of good will accruing to the United States as a result of its generous humanitarian response be translated into just and sustainable development—a kind of Marshall Plan for Haiti? If that occurs, may Africa expect a similar plan? In this sense, America's current behavior toward Haiti may be indicative of its future behavior toward Africa.

Conclusion

What should Africans do to induce a favorable response under an Obama administration?

First and foremost, Africans must seriously pursue a path of unity. It is a long shot to expect the implementation of the decades-old pan-Africanist ideal; but there should be a basic program of agreement among African countries vis-à-vis the rest of the world. United, Africa faces the world with one voice and has a better chance of extracting optimum advantages in trade and development. The African Union should take the initiative to achieve these ends.

Second, Africans should turn the rise of China to their advantage. In this, too, they need to be united. Let there be no illusion about the claim of the Chinese that they are part of the developing world. They will work for Chinese interests above all else, just as Americans or Europeans do for their respective countries. At least their terms and conditions may not be as detrimental to African populations as those of the IMF and the World Bank.

Third, Africans should demand that the West be part of the solution

in conflict areas. They must begin by obstructing the proliferation of small arms. China and the former “Eastern Bloc” must also be held accountable in this regard.

Fourth, Obama should lead in inspiring and enabling members of the African diaspora to invest in Africa. The exemplary work in Africa of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which aims to control and eradicate debilitating diseases like malaria, should be encouraged and given government support.

Fifth, America under Obama should lead the world in designing a Marshall Plan for Africa aimed at creating jobs and resolving conflicts stemming from competition for resources. A successful African Marshall Plan would stop the mass exodus of Africans to Europe and North America and thus help in establishing sustainable peace and justice in the continent. This would be the best legacy Obama could leave Africa and the world.

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