

ASR FORUM

Africa in the Age of Obama

Introduction

Elizabeth Schmidt

The euphoria greeting the election of Barack Hussein Obama as the forty-fourth president of the United States seized the popular imagination in Africa, much as it did in the U. S. There was hope and enormous goodwill on the continent, derived from President Obama's special tie to Africa—the dreams from his father that he has translated so eloquently. There was hope that the Obama administration would initiate new policies based on mutual respect, multilateral collaboration, and an awareness that there will be no security unless there is common security—and also that security must be broadly defined, extending beyond the military to include the environment, the economy, and health, as well as political and social rights. Yet as many anticipated, given the enormous and wide-ranging problems confronting the new administration, Africa has not been front and center on its agenda. Although President Obama visited Egypt in June and Ghana in July 2009, only a few months into his presidency, Africa has not become a centerpiece of his foreign policy.

In his much-publicized speech in Accra, President Obama lauded Ghana for its “repeated peaceful transfers of power,” declared that “development depends on good governance,” and urged Africans to take responsi-

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bility for their continent: “to hold [their] leaders accountable, and to build institutions that serve the people.” He pledged that the United States would support their efforts and committed his administration to opening the doors to African goods and services in ways that previous administrations have not. He pledged \$63 billion to a new, comprehensive global health strategy that would promote public health systems and combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, polio, and other devastating diseases. In the months that followed, he pledged to double American foreign aid to \$50 billion a year and to develop a multilateral program to combat hunger.

Despite these positive initiatives, serious questions remain. In his speech to the Ghanaian parliament in 2009, President Obama failed to mention the role of unfair global trade practices in exacerbating African impoverishment, to address the complicity of foreign nations in African corruption, conflicts, and environmental degradation, or to call out their role in the bloody battle for Africa’s resources. A permanent director of the U.S. Agency for International Development was not appointed until November 2009, and concern remains that USAID, which was severely weakened during the Bush years, will continue to be subordinated to short-term foreign policy goals. The militarization of U.S.–Africa policy, embodied in the 2008 unified Africa Command (AFRICOM), has continued apace. American allies continue to use “security concerns” and the war on terror to justify crackdowns on domestic political opposition. In Somalia, as in Afghanistan, the administration is caught between nation-building and counterterrorism objectives. In Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo, American thirst for strategic resources—and the desire for partners in the war against al Qaeda and its allies—has dampened the administration’s enthusiasm for significant action against those responsible for a horrendous toll in human life.

One year after Obama’s historic election, the African Studies Association organized a plenary session at the 2009 annual meeting in New Orleans to consider the implications of the Obama presidency for Africa. Three panelists at that session have contributed summaries of their remarks to this ASR Forum.

Bereket Habte Selassie notes the historic and symbolic significance of electing a person of African descent to the American presidency. He asks if, as a result of this election, Africans can expect substantive changes in U.S.–African policies, given the nature and structure of American politics and society. He poses three questions about American relations with Africa in this globalized age: What are African expectations of Obama? What should Obama do? What *can* he do? He responds to these questions in reference to peace and stability, sustainable economic development and social justice, and democracy and good governance.

Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja argues that, while Africans should take pride in having a person of African descent in the White House, they should have no illusions concerning how much President Obama can do for Africa.

American priorities are not African priorities. Africans must put their own house in order so that they may deal successfully with the major challenges facing the continent, in particular, the challenges of basic human rights and liberties, sustainable peace, sustainable development, and democratic and developmental governance.

And finally David Wiley focuses on the change in African attitudes and expectations resulting from Obama's election and offers good news concerning work on African issues in multilateral arenas. He warns, however, that heightening concerns about energy security and terrorism have led to an even greater militarization of U.S.–Africa policy, which links the Obama administration's policies closely to those of its predecessors.

Reference

Obama, Barack. 2009. Obama's Speech in Ghana. July 11. www.america.gov.