



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 2 · THURSDAY 11 JUNE 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 2

IT HAS TO START FROM HOME

Two weeks after George Floyd's murder: what police reform should mean, why activism works slowly, and how respect is actually earned.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 2 — the second broadcast, recorded the day after George Floyd's funeral.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

It Has To Start From Home

Two weeks after George Floyd's murder, the Professor sets out what police reform should actually contain — and then answers the harder question underneath it: how a people earns standing it is not being given.

The second episode of the series, recorded the day after George Floyd's funeral, with questions submitted through Slido, YouTube and Facebook. The moderator puts them; Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi answers. **His answer to the evening's biggest question is the one that names the issue: recognition is not won by begging or preaching. Japan built industrially, China built militarily, and both were treated differently afterwards. It has to start from home.**

An archive edition, recorded 11 June 2020, in the second week of global protests following George Floyd's murder and during the first wave of Covid-19 lockdowns. Figures, appointments and events are described as they stood that week.

01 · WHY AFRICAN CAPITALS SAID NOTHING

The first question comes from a viewer in Jos: African states take foreign direct investment from the United States — is that why their leaders have been silent about Floyd? The Professor says plainly that he has been surprised by the silence himself, and that he does not have a confident answer. He offers two possibilities without choosing between them: fear of antagonising Washington, or governments so consumed by Covid lockdowns that they have no attention left for anything else. There have been demonstrations in a few capitals, he notes, but not enough to write home about.

The exception he names with evident pleasure is Ghana, whose president sent a message to the funeral. It reminded him, he says, of Kwame Nkrumah's activism — Ghana once again acting on behalf of a continent rather than waiting to be spoken for.

“It reminded me of the days of the activism of Kwame Nkrumah. So maybe the circle has come around, and we are having another Ghana acting on behalf of Africa.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • FOUR REFORMS, AND WHY HE WILL NOT SAY DEFUND

He answers the reform question with a list rather than a slogan. First, restraint: he has been struck that restraining an African-American so often begins with a hand to the neck, and says that particular tactic must be abolished. Second, racial profiling — and his remedy is structural rather than attitudinal. There was not one black officer present when Floyd was killed. Patrol teams should be multiracial, so that an officer inclined to show prejudice knows a colleague is watching, and so that the civilian facing them is less afraid of what might happen.

Third, personal liability: where a court finds against an officer in a civil suit, the officer should carry the damages. Fourth, and least discussed elsewhere, the federal lever. American local forces receive surplus military weapons free of charge when the armed forces upgrade, and receive part of their budgets federally. He would use both to control and moderate police behaviour — a condition attached to the equipment.

On defunding he is careful to say he is not a participant in an American debate, and then declines the framing anyway. There will always be criminals, and a society needs a force that protects it from them — one that treats black and white criminals equally. The answer is control and reform, not withdrawal.

“The patrol team that goes out must be multiracial, so that any white policeman who is about to show prejudice will become conscious that there are black policemen with him who will notice what he is doing.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

Nigeria's policing gap

Before anyone debates defunding, the Professor points at a shortfall of a different order

Officers Nigeria has

As cited on this broadcast



350,000

A shortfall of 1,150,000

More than three-quarters of the officers the benchmark calls for.

The UN benchmark

For Nigeria's population and land area



1,500,000

Drawn to one scale: 1px = 1,250 officers. 350,000 → 280px; 1,500,000 → 1,200px.

“We are not even talking now about defunding. We need more policemen, better training, and more resource allocation.”

SESSION 2 • IT HAS TO START FROM HOME

Figures as stated on this broadcast

The figures as he cited them on air, drawn to a single scale. The UN benchmark is a recommendation for Nigeria, not a global ratio.

03 • WHAT DEFUNDING WOULD HAVE TO MEAN TO WORK

Having refused the word, he then reconstructs the useful idea inside it. Money moved out of policing should be transferred to social and economic reform in the neighbourhoods — which in turn means

less police intervention, which in turn means the police need fewer resources. The saving is a consequence of the reform, not the mechanism of it.

His examples are deliberately small. A domestic quarrel. A neighbour's dog off its leash in the path. These are matters that need some other body — funded by the local council — rather than an armed force. The problem he identifies is not the size of the police budget but the habit of dumping every social problem on the police and then being surprised by the result.

04 · IN NIGERIA THE PROBLEM RUNS THE OTHER WAY

Turning home, he inverts the entire debate. He has served on an electoral reform committee that examined how Nigeria uses its police, and cites the United Nations as recommending roughly 1.5 million officers for the country's population and land area. Nigeria has about 350,000. Whatever the argument in Minneapolis, the Nigerian conversation cannot begin with defunding.

What it needs, on his account, is more officers, better training and more resource allocation — while acknowledging honestly that every naira spent on police is a naira not spent on education or hospitals. But the money already voted is not reaching the ground: uniforms are budgeted for and somehow not provided, which he attributes to irresponsible behaviour by senior officers rather than to shortage.

The training gap he describes is specific. Officers are taught to march well and perform ceremonial parades; he is not persuaded they are taught how to handle civilians, or how to de-escalate rather than open with aggression. Asked whether the low standing of the job is itself the obstacle to recruitment, he points out that graduates were already entering as cadet assistant superintendents when he was teaching in the 1970s — the calibre is available if the conditions justify it.

“We are not even talking now about defunding. We need more policemen, better training, and more resource allocation for our policemen.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 · DOES ACTIVISM ACTUALLY WORK?

Asked whether activism delivers, given that the grievances of 1963 are still being marched about, he answers that it does — and reframes the question. Activism produced the civil rights marches, and the marches produced legislation: voting rights, housing benefits. Martin Luther King could not have won every battle. The measure is not whether one campaign settled everything but where the ratchet stopped.

He describes the mechanism as a balance of forces: you push, you get a pushback from those who disagree, and you consolidate what you won before pushing again. Within two weeks of Floyd's death, statues had come down in the United States and statues of slave owners had come down in Britain — but the debate behind them had been running for years. Activism must never end, and it will not achieve its objectives in a fortnight.

He is also realistic about the street. As a political scientist he knows demonstrations cannot continue for months; people go home until something brings them back. So the demand must convert into something durable, and his proposal is numerical: staged targets for representation in management, boardrooms, the police and the judiciary — 25 per cent within two years, 30 within five — pursued the way targets for women's participation were pursued.

“Activism must never end. It will not achieve all the objectives within one day or within two weeks.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • WHO IS REALLY STARTING THE VIOLENCE

On the violence attending the protests he raises a possibility he says people should not dismiss: that some of it is engineered to discredit the cause. He asks whether elements of the KKK, or others posing as protesters, may have had a hand in it — questions rather than assertions.

His precedent is British and documented. During Margaret Thatcher's confrontation with the coal miners, it emerged long afterwards that some of the violence attending those demonstrations had been orchestrated by members of the security forces — plain-clothes officers — specifically to discredit the miners. That it was not known at the time is the point.

He notes with approval that the activists themselves began policing their own ranks, turning on those who came to loot with the argument that this is not why we are here. Asked whether he feared for his life during his own activist years, he says no — and that those of them who were both establishment figures and activists made certain their demonstrations stayed non-violent, on one occasion by physically interposing himself outside a High Commission in London.

07 • IT HAS TO START FROM HOME

The evening's central question arrives late: how does the black race gain real relevance abroad, when it does not always treat itself as equal — the xenophobic violence in South Africa being the example offered. His answer is four words, and he repeats them.

The evidence he gives is two national biographies. The world once looked down on Japan, to the point of distinguishing between shoes made there and shoes made in the West. Nobody looks down on Japan now, and it was not achieved by begging or preaching — Japan built itself to a level at which it could not be ignored. He was a student in the United States in the 1960s and remembers the language American diplomats used about the Chinese; the day China tested its first nuclear weapon, that language turned to respect. China built militarily first, then pulled hundreds of millions into a middle class.

This, he says, is exactly what the Concert of Medium Powers was for — Nigeria seeing itself as a global actor, and using that standing to build the domestic base that would sustain it. He notes drily that his Black Bomb argument drew its fiercest criticism not from foreign capitals, which he later learned were rattled by the prospect, but from Nigerians. And he objects to one word in the question: intellectually there is nothing to make up. Nigerian graduates perform among the best wherever they go. What is missing is opportunity at home, in universities and in work, so that the talent has somewhere to be used.

“They didn't get recognition by begging. They didn't get recognition by preaching. They made sure they developed Japan to the level that Japan would not be ignored.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • ONE MAN CANNOT MAKE A FOREST

The closing argument is against tokenism, and it is the sharpest thing he says. One person cannot make a difference alone. Obama appointed a black Attorney General and several cabinet members, and the system remained what it was — like dropping a man into the sea without the instruments to survive: he spends the whole time making sure he does not drown. Give him the accompanying elements and he can perform.

He was surprised to learn how many American police chiefs are African-American, and unsurprised that it has changed little. One chief cannot reform a force whose officers, and whose police union, look nothing like the city. Hence percentages rather than appointments.

He then anticipates the objection — that quotas lower standards — and answers it with an inversion he says he used against the apartheid regime. If you truly believe a man is inferior, you do not need laws to stop him competing. The laws exist precisely because you know that without them he would show his talent. Remove the discrimination and people perform.

The last item is the nomination of the first black service chief in American history. He is careful with it in both directions: the man was nominated in March, before Floyd was killed, so this is not appeasement of the street; and his background shows it was earned, not tokenism. Then the sting — that the United States should be ashamed it has taken this long, and that the appointment to four-star rank came under Obama in 2016.

“If you believe that the African is inferior, why do you need to put all these laws in place to prevent him from performing? You don't need those laws if you really believe he is inferior.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He proposes multiracial patrol teams so that officers police each other's conduct. Does that work where the prejudice is institutional rather than individual — and what happens to the officer who reports a colleague?
- Nigeria needs 1.15 million more officers on the UN's benchmark. At what point does a shortfall that large stop being a resourcing problem and become an argument for a different model of policing altogether?
- Japan built industrially and China built militarily before either was treated with respect. Is there a third route available to a country that wants neither — or is that the whole point of the medium-powers argument?
- If quotas are the answer to tokenism, who sets the percentage, and what stops 25 per cent becoming its own ceiling?
- He suspects agents provocateurs and cites the miners' strike as precedent. How would a movement prove such a thing at the time, rather than thirty years later when the files open?

Watch Session 2 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

This is one of the earliest broadcasts in the series and the automatic transcript is correspondingly rough; quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — and the raw forms are listed in the transcript header. The US service chief discussed in the closing section is not named on the recording; he is Gen. Charles Q. Brown Jr., nominated in March 2020, identified here from public record and flagged rather than asserted. The 1.5 million UN figure and the 350,000 current strength are as the Professor cited them on air and have not been independently verified.