



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 6 · THURSDAY 9 JULY 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 6

THIRTY-THREE, AND IN THE ROOM

A 1975 photograph goes viral, and a generation asks why that door was open then. The answer is not about age.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 6 — prompted by a 1975 photograph that had gone round the internet.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Thirty-Three, And In The Room

A photograph from 1975 goes viral and a generation asks the obvious question: how were you there at that age, and why is the door shut now? His answer refuses the easy grievance and lands somewhere less comfortable.

A solo broadcast built from viewer questions, and the first in the series prompted by an image rather than an event. Someone sent the Professor a photograph on WhatsApp: himself at 33, at the inauguration of Nigeria's Constitution Drafting Committee, standing near a head of state barely three years older. **The evening opens elsewhere — on how development is measured and who chooses the backdrop — before arriving at the question the photograph provoked. His answer is not that his generation was luckier, but that a different system was selecting for different things.**

An archive edition, recorded 9 July 2020, in the fourth month of the Covid-19 emergency and four months before the US presidential election. Ages, offices and events are described as they stood that week; where the Professor's recollected figures differ from the record, the correction is noted.

01 · DEVELOPMENT AND CIVILISATION ARE NOT THE SAME THING

The moderator opens with a story rather than a question. Served a delicacy abroad in a bowl that would have looked doubtful in a Nigerian village, he asks whether development requires abandoning what is local. The Professor answers issue by issue, and refuses both sweeping positions.

Some of our tradition survives the transition and some does not — and he notes that the same is true of Chinese, Japanese and European tradition, parts of which their own societies would no

longer accept. His test case is deliberately hard: where religion is invoked to justify not educating women, that is not a tradition to be preserved, because it damages the future.

Eating with the fingers, by contrast, he simply accommodates, with the observation that context governs — you would not do it at a Buckingham Palace dinner, just as an English visitor would not bring cutlery to a village meal. What is not negotiable are the parameters: infrastructure, health, education for the whole population rather than half of it, and the proportion of women in governance. Those, he says, are globally accepted, and tradition is not a defence against them.

“There are people who say that for the sake of religion they cannot educate women. That would be unacceptable now, for the sake of measuring development.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • WHO CHOOSES THE BACKDROP

Asked why supposedly developed countries have looked so poorly prepared during the pandemic — health systems strained, infrastructure creaking, power outages in places that were not supposed to have them — he makes the sharpest observation of the first half: the definition of development has become part of propaganda.

His example is journalistic and precise. Until about five years ago, correspondents sent to Africa were citizens of Western societies, and when they filed they stood in front of a local market with an open drain behind them. Filing from London or New York, the same profession chose Bond Street or Wall Street. Nothing was falsified; the backdrop did the work. It changed, he notes, when African journalists became the correspondents and began choosing frames that showed urban development instead.

The underlying point is that no country has absorbed its whole population. Every nation has left some proportion below the poverty line, without health cover, without reliable water or power. He offers his own observation of run-down American infrastructure, and declines to name the area so as not to be accused of doing to somewhere else what he has just described.

“The definition of development has actually become part of propaganda. Let's not beat about the bush.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • THE ARGUMENT HE LOST IN CABINET

Asked whether Africa should do more to sell itself, he recounts a proposal he made as foreign minister and could not carry: hire Western public relations firms as consultants rather than posting information officers from the ministry to embassies abroad.

The reasoning is entirely about access. An information officer arriving in Washington did not go to school with the editor of the Washington Post, and cannot telephone the head of CNN. A public relations firm's staff probably did, and can. The colleagues who objected — chiefly from the Information Ministry — wanted the work kept in-house, and won.

He calls that misplaced nationalism, and separates the sentiment from the objective with some care: he is as nationalistic as the next person, but the goal was to reach the largest possible audience, and the honest answer is that a national broadcaster does not. There is also, he adds, the question of credibility — the target audience will weigh the same story differently depending on whether it comes from a Nigerian correspondent or the BBC, which is a fact about the audience rather than about the journalism.

"You send an information officer to Washington. Did he go to school with the editor of the Washington Post?"

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • THE PHOTOGRAPH

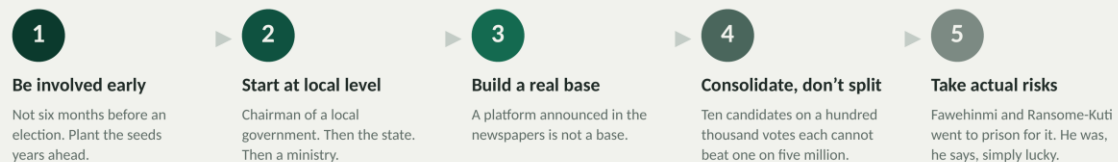
Shown the viral image, he identifies it immediately. It was taken in 1975 at the Institute, which was being used as the venue to inaugurate the constitution drafting committee set up to produce a new constitution for Nigeria. The newly installed head of state, General Murtala Muhammed, had come for the occasion.

He is careful to say he was not a passive attendee. He had arranged for the premises and the particular hall, and had contributed to some of the ideas the head of state was going to use. He was 33; Murtala, he reckons, about 36. They were the same generation.

The question the photograph provoked — put to him bluntly — is why that door was open then, and why the men with white hair are not opening it now.

The route he actually prescribes

His answer to the younger generation, in the order he gave it — and none of it starts at the top



"Be prepared to be involved — and not wait until it is election time."

SESSION 6 • THIRTY-THREE, AND IN THE ROOM

As advised on this broadcast

His answer to the generation that asked, in the order he gave it.

05 • WHY THE MILITARY APPOINTED THE YOUNG, AND PARTY POLITICS DOES NOT

His first move is to refuse the generalisation. Gerontocracy is not an African phenomenon: the two men contesting the American presidency that November were both in their seventies, while Jefferson signed the Declaration in his thirties and Kennedy took office in his forties. It is a global pattern with local variations.

Then he explains the difference that actually mattered, and it is not flattering to democracy. A military head of state was appointing to a programme he had decided on, and could afford to look for people who would help him deliver it. Babangida, he says, was knowledgeable enough and confident enough to welcome people with ideas around him. His cabinet colleagues bear this out: Kalu Idika Kalu came from the World Bank to Finance, and Tam David-West from the university to Petroleum — professionals and over-achievers rather than godfathers' nominees, given the chance to put into practice what they had been arguing for.

A party-driven civilian system, by contrast, is not looking for people to run the programme. It is rewarding those who helped win the election, and money enters the calculation ahead of ideas. The result, he argues, is a systematic waste of the brightest and the best — and not only in Nigeria. He contrasts Kennedy and Obama, both Harvard-educated men who surrounded themselves with intelligence, against a president he says seems afraid of his own shadow.

“You are not looking for somebody who is going to help you run your system. You are rewarding people who helped you win the election, whether they understand your agenda or not.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • AND PART OF THE FAULT IS YOURS

Having explained the structure, he turns the argument on the people asking. Six of the governors elected in 1999 were in their thirties. Three of them declared for the presidency after Obasanjo, and none was blocked legally or constitutionally — they met every parameter. They failed inside their own parties.

At the last election there were around ten candidates in their early forties, and attempts were made to get them to consolidate behind one. They did not. Some polled a hundred thousand votes each while the eventual winner took over five million. Ten people who will not combine cannot defeat one man, however old he is.

His prescription follows from that, and it is unsentimental. Be involved before it is election season. Contest something — a local government chairmanship, a governorship, a ministry — rather than announcing a platform in the newspapers six months out with no grassroots behind it. Be strategic about the political process rather than expecting it to yield to a good CV.

“If you are going to be that ego driven and selfish, there is no way ten people are going to defeat one man, no matter how old that man is.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 • THE PRICE, AND THE LUCK

The section that complicates his own story is the one about risk. Asked whether activists went to prison because they were wrong or because the system was compromised, he says plainly that those who ran the system saw them as threats. Gani Fawehinmi took that risk. Beko Ransome-Kuti took it. Both were detained, and some would say it contributed to their early deaths.

Then the admission that gives the episode its weight: had Murtala's coup not happened in 1975, the outgoing regime would probably have detained him too. There were, he says, enough indications that the loud activists were going to be dealt with. Circumstances, luck and hard work combined — in that order, in his telling.

He also declines to present his own path as the only respectable one. Colleagues stayed in the university until retirement at seventy and never left the cocoon; others took the same degrees into Shell, BP and Texaco and made their careers there. He chose intellectual activism, and some of his university colleagues thought he was being reckless.

“If Murtala's coup had not taken place, the previous regime would probably have detained me. We were just lucky.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • WHAT GOVERNMENT IS ACTUALLY FOR

The closing question is how much of development should be the state's job. He treats it as a choice of model rather than a matter of principle. In most developing countries the government is quite rightly the engine — setting the parameters, ensuring the objectives are followed, enforcing the rules of engagement, whether on the Thai, Singaporean or Chinese pattern.

The caution he adds is the useful part. What looks like free-for-all capitalism in the United States is in fact a thoroughly organised and policed system, and anyone who knew how many bodies exist there to monitor and regulate participation would be surprised. The contrast he draws is with foreign investment that arrives carrying nothing but empty suitcases and, within three or four years, is exporting the proceeds.

So government is unavoidable, but it must be the positive kind — building institutions that prevent that extraction and that actively encourage domestic participation, rather than the kind that teams up with foreigners against its own people. His last words are addressed to the young people who prompted the evening: you are well educated, you have seen other systems and can sift what is worth using. Your government must support you rather than work against you.

“What looks like free-for-all capitalism as practised in the United States is in fact a very thoroughly organised and policed system.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He accepts UN development parameters as globally valid while arguing that development coverage is propaganda. Can a yardstick be legitimate if the reporting built on it is not?
- Hiring foreign PR firms to tell your story is effective and slightly humiliating. Which other national functions should be outsourced on the same logic — and where does that stop?
- If military governments promoted young professionals and party systems promote financiers, the uncomfortable implication is that this particular good came from an undemocratic source. What democratic mechanism would reproduce it?
- Ten candidates who would not consolidate lost to one who did. Is that a failure of individual ego, or of a party system with no mechanism for producing a single challenger?
- He says he was lucky not to be detained. How much of the advice he gives the young generalises from a career that turned on one coup happening when it did?

Watch Session 6 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

An early broadcast with a correspondingly rough automatic transcript; quotations have been cleaned for readability — punctuation and obvious mis-transcriptions only, never sense — with the raw forms listed in the transcript header. Several figures the Professor recalls from memory differ from the record and are given here as his recollections rather than as fact: he places Jefferson at 36 at the Declaration (he was 33), Kennedy at about 45 on taking office (43), and Trump and Biden at 76-77 and 78 in July 2020 (74 and 77). His statement that 40 per cent or more of Americans lacked medical insurance even under Obamacare is well above the recorded rate of roughly nine to ten per cent that year, and is not reproduced as fact in this issue. One cabinet colleague named on the recording could not be recovered from the audio and has been omitted rather than guessed at.