



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 9 · THURSDAY 30 JULY 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 9

THE QUIET MAN AT THE TABLE END

A negotiation in China that taught him what a room really contains —
and a week in which an American election was floated as optional.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 9 — recorded on the day an American president first floated postponing an American election.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

The Quiet Man At The End Of The Table

A negotiation in Beijing taught him that the person facing you across a table is not necessarily the person who decides. Thirty years later the lesson is doing work on Chinese loans, an American election, and a vaccine announced without a protocol.

A solo broadcast recorded on 30 July 2020 — the day of John Lewis's funeral, the day after Washington announced it was pulling troops out of Germany, the day after Moscow said its vaccine would be in arms within a fortnight, and the day the President of the United States asked in public whether the election might be delayed. **The Professor opens instead with a story from his own career, and it turns out to be the frame for everything after it: what you are shown is not what is there.**

An archive edition, recorded 30 July 2020, in the fifth month of the Covid-19 emergency and three months before the US presidential election. Offices, disputes and figures are described as they stood that week; where the Professor's recollections differ from the record, the correction is noted rather than quietly fixed.

01 · THE MAN WHO HAD SAID NOTHING FOR THREE DAYS

A viewer asks whether his position on China has changed since he ran Nigeria's foreign policy think tank. It has not — and the reason is a principle he still holds: that a country as important as Nigeria could not leave its international interaction to embassies and diplomatic staff alone. The foreign policy elite of one country should talk directly to the foreign policy elite of another, so that the

country benefits alongside the government. His institute talked to the Chinese, the Americans, the Russians, the French.

Then he tells the story. The Nigerian delegation sat on one side of a table in China, the Chinese delegation on the other. He led his side and sat at the head, and assumed the man facing him led theirs. Three days of argument followed, and on the third day the Chinese produced a draft communiqué they expected the Nigerians simply to sign.

This was a period, he explains, when Beijing's experience of African delegations was of liberation movements arriving as supplicants — asking for things, and signing what was put in front of them. When the Nigerian side refused, the Chinese did not know what to do with the refusal. They said that if the document was not signed the conference was over. He said that was fine; they would leave without an agreement.

And then the man at the far end of the table, who had not spoken in three days, said that the Nigerian side was correct and the communiqué should reflect both positions. Everything changed at once. Two lessons came out of that room, he says: the Chinese had met a kind of African delegation they had not met before, and he had learned that in China what you see is not necessarily what you get.

“It struck me then that he was the most important Chinese man in the room — and he was sitting at the tail end of the table, and he had not said a word.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · CHINESE LOANS: READ THE TERMS, NOT THE PROPAGANDA

Asked whether Chinese lending is a new colonisation, he separates three things that the question had bundled together, and answers them in order.

First, there is nothing wrong with Africa broadening the base of its economic relationships rather than depending on a single source. That much he treats as settled. Second, the anxiety about Chinese domination arriving from Western commentary should be recognised for what it partly is — an interest in protecting an existing trading relationship with Africa. He is explicit that this does not make the anxiety baseless, only that it should be assessed on the documents rather than on the mood.

Third, and at length: the terms. Do not sign what you cannot service. Do not accept a loan advanced in one currency and repayable in another — yuan out, dollars back, is unequal on its face. And interrogate the project itself. A railway financed over twenty years must carry enough passengers to pay for itself; if the traffic will not sustain it and you already know you will be back asking for restructuring, do not sign.

On the clause that has caused the most alarm — that a borrowing state cannot plead sovereign immunity to escape arbitration — he is almost impatient. That is standard in commercial agreements, including those African governments sign with Western companies; the British courts are full of such cases. Political relations are where sovereignty protects you. Economic relations are not.

His conclusion cuts both ways, which is why it is worth reproducing in full: do not play into the hands of people who want Africa to have no relationship with China at all, and do not let China press agreements on Africa that cannot be sustained.

“Get your economic experts to look at the terms, and make sure the contract is not going to lead you into economic slavery.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • TEN DAYS OF NEWS, AND THE QUESTIONS THEY PRODUCED

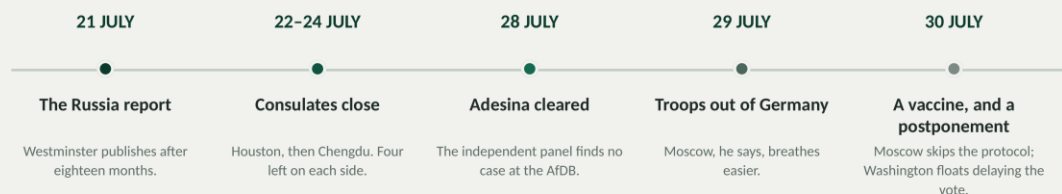
The session is unusually anchored in a single fortnight, and it is worth setting the events out in order, because almost every question the moderator puts comes from one of them.

He returns briefly to the argument he made the previous week — that China is fighting on too many fronts at once — and adds a front that had emerged since: the allegation that Chinese hackers had broken into the Vatican's diplomatic communications. Something, he says, is wrong with China's diplomatic profile.

On the consulates he is almost technical. Each country has five in the other; one each has now closed, leaving four; the next move belongs to Washington, and it need not be another closure. There are contact points between the two countries all over the world, and a button can be pressed at any of them.

Ten days that shaped the session

Every question the moderator asked came from this fortnight of news



"I cannot believe what I am hearing. Even during the Civil War, they held the election."

SESSION 9 • THE QUIET MAN AT THE TABLE END

Dates as reported that week

The fortnight the session runs on, in the order the events happened.

04 • A RAINBOW OF DEMOCRACY, AND THE INEXPERIENCE PROBLEM

Malawi's rerun election, won by the opposition after the courts annulled the first result, prompts a warning against the easy reading. Democracy is not the opposition replacing the government; it is a free, fair and transparent process, and that process can perfectly well return the incumbent. What Malawi demonstrates is the second thing — grievances aired and settled inside the judicial system, as they were in Kenya, and as they have been in other cases where the courts upheld the result rather than overturning it.

On that basis he is willing to be positive, and offers a phrase of his own: there is a rainbow of democracy in Africa. Governments have changed by election in Ghana, in Nigeria, and now in Malawi.

His reservation about the new president is not about the win but about what follows it. Appointments drawn from family and locality rather than from the civil society organisations and trade unions that helped win the election trouble him; so does inexperience at the top of a system nobody has worked their way up. It is the argument he made in an earlier session about young candidates, restated: someone who has never been a local government councillor or a senator and goes straight for the presidency may not have the gravitas the office needs.

Asked whether there should be a qualification test, he declines to interfere with the vote and points instead at the machinery. Several African constitutions have adopted the American practice of legislative confirmation, so that cabinet members and supreme court judges are vetted a second time. He does not know Malawi's provisions, but he thinks constitutions without such a stage should consider adding one.

“Democracy is not just winning an election. It is also how you run the government.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • THE AFDB VERDICT, AND THE WHISTLEBLOWER HE WANTS HELD TO ACCOUNT

He is unguardedly pleased that the independent panel has cleared Dr. Akinwumi Adesina. He had said on this programme that the panel was unfair to the bank and to its president, and not provided for in the bank's articles. What changed his mind was the calibre of the people appointed to it: Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland and former United Nations human rights commissioner, in the chair; the Chief Justice of The Gambia; and a South African from the legal and judicial track who had worked at the World Bank. Once he saw the names, he says, he slept with both eyes closed.

He then stops the moderator moving on, because something has been bothering him, and it produces the most portable proposal of the evening. The institution of the whistleblower was introduced to encourage honesty and probity, and it is now clear that it can be abused. His remedy is symmetry: if the allegation is upheld, the target should be dismissed — and if the whistleblower is found to have been mischievous, the whistleblower should be dismissed too.

The reasoning is managerial rather than punitive. Without a cost attached to false allegation, chief executives cannot concentrate on their work, are afraid to discipline anyone, and are afraid to run the organisation as it should be run.

“Where the whistleblower is found to have been mischievous, the whistleblower should be dismissed. Otherwise no chief executive can concentrate on the job.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • ARMED GROUPS ON AMERICAN STREETS

Armed black groups had begun appearing at demonstrations, and armed white groups in response. He calls it worrying not just for him but for the United States and for the world, because all it takes is one person letting off a shot before there is gunfire from every direction. He recalls an American commentator warning of civil war on American streets, and admits that he had thought the warning overdrawn.

His appeal is directed at the President, and his attribution of responsibility is direct: the rhetoric demonising demonstrators as hijacked by radicals, and the deployment of federal law enforcement into American cities that some constitutional lawyers had called unlawful, are what has brought armed civilians into the street. The remedy is available and cheap — lower the rhetoric, affirm the right to demonstrate peacefully, and let constitutionally recognised agencies handle any breakdown of order.

When a viewer notes that the white groups appeared first, he refuses the invitation to treat that as a technicality. It matters who is wrong. He recalls the Virginia rally early in the term where a demonstrator was killed and the President's response was that there were good people on both sides — a formulation for which he was widely condemned. There is always a right group and a wrong group, and moral relativity is not a form of fairness.

"It is a disgrace for the United States to have this kind of confrontation between racial groups, armed to the teeth."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 • THE BULL IN THE CHINA SHOP

Asked whether Africa should have accepted the American demand for an outside panel at all, he answers with a piece of practical diplomacy rather than a principle, and prefaces it with an unusual personal disclosure: he studied in the United States, spent his formative years there, has many friends there, met and admired John F. Kennedy, admires Carter and Clinton, and has some admiration for Obama. He does not want to be heard as anti-American.

What he fears is a specific capacity — the capacity to destroy institutions. Had Africa refused the panel, he does not think it beyond the American administration to have set about destroying the African Development Bank by whatever means were available.

Hence the image the section takes its name from. When there is a bull loose in a china shop, you do not argue with the bull; you move the breakable things out of its way until it has finished rampaging. The panel, on that reading, was the cost of keeping the bank intact — and now that the verdict is in, he hopes the attention moves elsewhere.

"When you are dealing with a bull in a china shop, you may just have to move the things that can be broken while the bull is still rampaging."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • TROOPS OUT OF GERMANY, AND WHO ACTUALLY BENEFITS

The withdrawal of American troops from Germany, announced the day before, he judges badly thought out — and he makes the case on American interests rather than European ones.

Those troops were a linchpin of NATO and part of the post-war shield built against the Soviet Union. Moving them further from Russia leaves Moscow breathing easier and NATO scrambling for a strategy without its strongest defensive anchor. He acknowledges the grievance behind the decision, and states it fairly: successive American presidents have complained that European states built their economies while the United States carried the financial burden of the alliance, and this is a way of forcing Germany to spend more on its own posture.

But the maintenance of those forces is part of what sustains the United States as a global power, and America has been the beneficiary. Keeping troops in Germany is cheaper than flying them six hours across the Atlantic when a problem arises with Russia — and not merely cheaper, but strategically better. The decision, in his reading, is counterproductive.

He notes, with the deference of someone declaring an interest, that the President is the commander-in-chief and was elected — and that he himself is not American and has no vote.

"Those troops are part of the prop that sustains the position of the United States as a global power. America has benefited from that as well."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • "EVEN DURING THE CIVIL WAR, THEY HELD THE ELECTION"

John Lewis's essay ran in the New York Times that day, calling the November vote probably the most important election ever held in the United States. The Professor takes the point but registers a scholar's dissent: the election that returned Abraham Lincoln has a stronger claim.

Then the moderator raises the news of the afternoon — that the President had floated postponing the election — and the register of the whole broadcast changes. He says three times that he cannot believe what he is hearing. The objection is not partisan but procedural and historical, and he sets it out cleanly. An election was held during the American Civil War, and Lincoln was returned for a second term. An election was held during the Second World War. Covid-19 is not going to stop an American presidential election.

Nor, he points out, is it in the President's gift. Refusing a hypothetical question because the premise is legally impossible, he notes that the power does not exist: it would take two-thirds of the states to amend the constitution to do it.

What he says next he prefaces twice with I hate to say this, and it is the most striking sentence in the archive so far: if it were attempted, he would foresee intervention by the American military to restore constitutional government. Not because he wants it, but because what is being described is a coup, and this is not the United States anyone was used to.

“You want to benefit from your own inefficiency with this crack-brained idea? Even during the American Civil War they held an election.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • MEDIUM POWERS, AND A VACCINE ANNOUNCED WITHOUT A PROTOCOL

Asked whether America is redirecting resources from Russia towards China, he notes that the troops are moving to other European cities rather than to Taiwan or Japan, which would be the move the theory predicts. Then he restates the warning he has given in lectures elsewhere and on this programme the week before: the most dangerous moment is when a rising power meets a declining one and one of them miscalculates when to mount the challenge. Germany miscalculated in 1914 and Hitler miscalculated in 1939, and millions died establishing the error. His hope is that between a descending United States and an ascending China there is no third instance.

That is also where his own concept re-enters. The global scene is in enough flux for a medium power like Nigeria to play an activist role, because both Washington and Beijing are now looking for allies. If the heavens fall they fall on everybody's head; a military confrontation between the two would spare nobody. Medium powers acting in concert have, on his reading, both an interest and an opening.

The evening closes on the announcement from Moscow that a vaccine would be introduced within a fortnight. He sets out the protocol precisely — a first stage in tens of people, a second in perhaps three thousand, a third across a larger population in more countries, each stage peer-reviewed with the details published so other scientists can evaluate them — and then says what has been skipped. You do not sneak a vaccine onto people.

The competition to be first is not only about pride: whoever has a working vaccine first will vaccinate billions and sell to the rest of the world, and the money is enormous. Which is why he wants the World Health Organization to intervene, and why he thinks the American withdrawal from it looks worse now than it did. If a country wants to take risks with its own population that is one thing. The rest of the world is another.

“Each stage is peer-reviewed. You make the details available so other scientists can evaluate what you are doing. You do not sneak it onto people.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- The man at the end of the table was invisible by design. If a delegation cannot tell who decides, what is the value of everything said across the table for three days?
- He defends the sovereign-immunity waiver as standard commercial practice. Does that settle the objection, or does standard practice deserve the scrutiny rather than the exemption?
- A rainbow of democracy, judged on process rather than outcome — but Malawi's process worked because a court was willing to annul an election. How many of the systems he praises would survive that test?
- Symmetrical penalties for whistleblowers would deter false allegations and, plausibly, true ones. Where would he set the standard of proof?
- He foresees the American military restoring constitutional government. That is a remedy that has ended democracies elsewhere. What distinguishes the case he is imagining?

Watch Session 9 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. Two recollections differ slightly from the record and are given as his: the Charlottesville rally was about seven months into the term rather than six, and one counter-protester was killed there; and Malawi's new president had contested the presidency twice before, so the description of a first attempt at office understates his record. The executive director of the International Trade Centre, referenced in a viewer's question, is not named on the recording and is not named here.