



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 10 · THURSDAY 6 AUGUST 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 10 · MASTER CLASS 1 OF 4

GOVERNANCE IS THE SMALL THINGS

A warehouse nobody emptied for years, a contract clause nobody read, and the four things he says actually make a career.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 10 — the first of four Diplomacy Master Class editions, opened by the Beirut explosion.

FROM THE ARCHIVE · MASTER CLASS 1 OF 4

Governance Is The Small Things

The first of four master class editions. It begins with a warehouse in Beirut that nobody emptied, moves through the contract clause African parliaments were arguing about, and arrives at the four things he says actually account for a career — one of which he does not claim credit for.

A solo broadcast recorded on 6 August 2020, two days after the Beirut port explosion and at the start of a four-week strand the moderator has billed as a master class. The Professor asks to speak before the strand begins, and what he says frames the rest. **Ammonium nitrate sat at the port for years while professionals filed warnings that went nowhere, because there was no money in acting on them. That, he argues, is the characteristic failure of developing-country governance — not the big contract, but the small matter nobody is paid to notice.**

An archive edition, recorded 6 August 2020, in the fifth month of the Covid-19 emergency. Casualty figures, offices and disputes are described as they stood that week; where the Professor's figures differ from the record, the correction is noted rather than quietly fixed.

01 · THE WAREHOUSE NOBODY EMPTIED

He skips the greetings. What happened in Beirut, he says, should not be allowed to pass without being pressed into everyone's consciousness. A store of ammonium nitrate had been held at the port for years; port professionals had brought it to the attention of ministers, of the national assembly, of the executive; everyone knew it could go up; nobody dealt with it.

His reading of why is the part that generalises. Not conspiracy, not incapacity — simply that there was no money to be made from dealing with it. The sum involved in clearing a hazard is too small for anyone to spend their time on it. That, he argues, is why the failure is more likely in a developing country, though he is careful not to claim it could not happen anywhere.

Then he turns it on his own audience with a question worth reading twice: how many abandoned containers sit in your ports, your airports, your dry ports, posing a danger of enormous proportion to the people who live nearby, while nobody pays any attention?

“Governance is not just about the big contract. It is not just about the big issues. Governance is also about the small matter.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • THE DEBT ARGUMENT, AND THE WORD HE WOULD HAVE DELETED

Returning to the previous week's subject, he first refuses to let it be a story about China. Africa went through a period when its aircraft and shipping were impounded around the world for unpaid landing and handling charges, seized under agreements the countries themselves had signed — and it was Western companies and Western governments doing the seizing.

He then agrees with the critics on the substance. Borrowing at a level you already know you cannot service, and then seeking rescheduling or forgiveness, is a legitimate thing to be upset about — and Sri Lanka gets a mention alongside African cases. He is equally clear that lenders expect to be repaid one way or another. Forgiveness and rescheduling are not gifts; they come back as a request for your vote at an international conference, or for a candidate at the United Nations, with a reminder of how kind they were to you.

The heart of the section is a legal distinction most of the public argument had been missing. Sovereign immunity — what lawyers call *jure imperii* — protects a state's political and diplomatic acts. Commercial acts, *jure gestionis*, are not protected, and have not been since the early twentieth century, when states began owning and trading through companies and claiming immunity for them. If a state could claim immunity for its trading, its counterparty would be at a permanent disadvantage.

What he objects to is the drafting rather than the principle. He would not have used the word sovereign in the contract at all; he would have written that immunity cannot be claimed over repayment or in a dispute. In the National Assembly, he says, he would simply move to delete it. And then the categorical part: no international law permits China to march into an African country and seize government buildings or institutions. If it is in the contract, and the contract was signed with open eyes, that is another matter entirely.

“There is no international law that will permit China to march into any African country and seize government buildings. None. But if it is in the contract they signed with their eyes open, that is a different matter.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • FOUR FACTORS, AND THE ONE HE WILL NOT TAKE CREDIT FOR

Asked what has kept him focused, and what he would say to talented people without his opportunities, he gives a four-part answer: talent, opportunity, hard work, and what he calls God's grace.

He attributes the framing to Konrad Adenauer, the first post-war Chancellor of West Germany, who described success as standing on a stage wondering what to do while God walks by, and catching hold of the hem of the garment. The point of the fourth factor is comparative: it is what distinguishes a person with talent, opportunity and long hours who makes it from a person with all three who does not. He is careful to say he is not a preacher, and equally careful not to let the audience mistake the argument for fatalism — because you cannot know when the intervention comes, you keep working.

He is also unwilling to accept the questioner's premise that he was a gifted child, and disposes of it with a joke against himself: if he listed how often he was beaten at primary and secondary school, nobody would be talking about early talent. He notes that corporal punishment is now regarded as not done, describes it as the discipline of his time, says plainly that what worked for him may not work for anyone else — and moves on.

“Talent, opportunity, hard work — and grace. Your time is not His time, so you keep working and you do not give up.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • THE SOCIETY HE FOUNDED, AND THE TWO MEN HE INVITED

The illustration he offers is the best account of his own break in the archive so far, and its moral is not the one you expect.

He returned to Nigeria in 1970 with a doctorate and a lectureship, and noticed a vacuum: there was no platform where what he calls the foreign policy elite could meet, argue and work out how Nigerian interests, pan-African interests and world interests fitted together. So he set out to found the Nigerian Society of International Affairs — and had to decide whom to invite as founding members. He read the newspapers to see who was saying what, and among those he invited were two serving officers, one of them a brigadier.

Three years later those men were part of a coup he had no idea was coming. One became head of state, the other his second in command, and they wanted an expert in foreign affairs. He is unsentimental about why it was him: there were probably more brilliant people in the field, but he was the one they had interacted with.

The lesson he draws is not about talent at all. It is about a decision taken years earlier for no strategic reason — to make the society inclusive rather than confining it to university teachers. Had he decided he did not want military men in the room, none of it happens.

“It is possible there were more brilliant people than I in that field. But I was the only one they had interacted with.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • THE SAME PRINCIPLE, TRANSLATED FOR AN ORGANISATION

Asked how this applies to someone running a business, he answers in a list, and it is unusually blunt for him.

Declare your objective. Be prepared to accept bright minds around you and to share the objective with them. Where they bind to it, work as a team. Where there are disruptive elements, do not spend your energy trying to persuade them — let them go, and if they will not go, remove them. And do not be afraid to assert your authority; you are the one accountable for the organisation.

The line that carries the section is about who actually threatens a leader. Bright people are not a threat if you are clear in your own mind about what the organisation is for. What should worry you are the people who swim along adding no value — those are the ones who will not get you to the objective.

He also restates the whistleblower proposal from the previous week and extends it to the private sector: if an independent body finds the allegations baseless, the whistleblower should leave; if it finds them true, the chief executive should. And if the chief executive owns the company and cannot be asked to leave, then the methods have to change instead.

“Bright brains are no threat to you. What should worry you are the people who just swim along and add no value.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · WHAT COUNTS AS A FAILURE OF DIPLOMACY

A viewer asks whether the rising tensions — China, Israel's neighbours, Turkey's neighbours — represent a failure of diplomacy. He declines the framing and replaces it with a definition worth keeping.

The purpose of diplomacy is to ensure interests are articulated clearly enough that neither party is under an illusion about the other's position. Conflict is therefore not automatically a diplomatic failure: some conflicts cannot be resolved by conversation, and when they cannot, threats and then force are the classical next terms. What is a failure is a conflict that arises from misconception.

His illustration is a story he says he will never forget. Asked after the first Iraq war whether he had not considered how the United States would react to the invasion, Saddam Hussein answered that he was not crazy — that without the wink and the nod from the American ambassador he would never have gone in. If that reading of the ambassador was wrong, the war came from a misimpression, and that is precisely a failure of diplomacy. If he had been told plainly that America would fight and went anyway, it is not a failure of diplomacy but, as Saddam himself put it, an act of madness.

The application to 2020 is the fear he shares with the article he had been reading. The First World War began with an assassination in a corner of Europe nobody considered central, and escalated through threats and ultimatums into something no participant had planned. With aircraft and ships crowding the same waters, a collision between an American and a Chinese aircraft or vessel could do the same work — and worse, a collision between a Chinese ship and one belonging not to the United States but to an American ally, Japan or Australia, which drags the United States in on behalf of someone else.

Should diplomacy be conducted in public?

The two schools he sets out — and the middle range he says you have to find

Open the windows

Secrecy is what let the wars happen

- Secret treaties and secret undertakings are blamed for the Crimean War, the Napoleonic wars and 1914.
- Let people see which interests are being advanced on their behalf, so ego does not decide whether a country fights.

VS

Close the door

Concessions cannot be made in a market square

- A diplomat must be able to concede something in confidence. In public, nothing moves.
- Kennedy promised Khrushchev the Turkish missiles would go — on condition nobody was told. Both publics learned later.

"Let some air in. Do not open the windows and let a gale into diplomacy."

SESSION 10 • DIPLOMACY MASTER CLASS

As argued on this broadcast

The closing question of the evening, and the two positions he lays out on it.

07 • WHO CONTROLS THE PEOPLE WHO HOLD THE DATA

Asked about tech companies and information, he starts where a diplomat would — with WikiLeaks. Diplomacy runs on confidentiality, because a diplomat has to be able to make a concession, with his government's approval, without doing it in the marketplace of public opinion. What governments fear most, he says, is public pressure over matters the public knows very little about.

The illustration is the Cuban missile crisis. Kennedy told Khrushchev that if the missiles came out of Cuba, American missiles would come out of Turkey in six months — with the condition that if the arrangement became public, it was off and the Cuban missiles would have to come out anyway. The missiles left Cuba; months later the Turkish missiles were withdrawn on what was presented as strategic reassessment; neither public knew they had watched a bargain being executed.

Then he sets the diplomatic question aside for the larger one, and this is where the section turns. What worries him about the technology giants is not their effect on diplomacy but the volume of information they hold on individuals — and the fact that the machines are moderated by people who can see it. We worry about intelligence agencies, which are at least overseen by Congress and by parliaments that can legislate. Who oversees the giants? In several cases, one person.

His proposal is institutional. An international convention to regulate them, and the breaking up of monopolies so that no single company holds all the data on human civilisation and can manipulate it if it chooses. He hopes the United Nations will be energised after the pandemic and the November election to take this and similar questions on — not out of hostility to progress, but to make sure that what is called progress is progress.

"Intelligence agencies are controlled by congress, by parliament. Who controls the super giants? One person controls the information. That is the threat to human civilisation."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • TWITTER IS NOT A CHANNEL FOR FOREIGN POLICY

On leaders announcing policy on social media he is categorical and brief: an ambassador at post should learn his government's policy through cables and secure telephone lines, not from a public feed. Twitter has never been and will never be a legitimate avenue for diplomacy.

The second half of his answer is about medical information and it is the more urgent of the two. Information not verified by the medical community should not be broadcast; if you are ill, speak to

your doctor, who is trained and knows more about your body than you do. A politician advising a population — still more the American president addressing, in effect, the world — on what to take for a headache, an ulcer or high blood pressure is dangerous, not least because no dosage comes with it.

The principle he draws is wider than the pandemic: medicine should not be dictated by politics, and there is a large territory that belongs to scientists rather than to politicians. That masks became a political question at all he calls unfortunate and dangerous, and he cites an interview with a couple who did not believe in them until they nearly died, and who wore them afterwards while acknowledging that in their community it was still considered unmanly.

He welcomes, tentatively, the platforms beginning to take down accounts that breach their own thresholds — while noting it is only a beginning.

“Medicine shall not be dictated by politics. It should be left to the medical people.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 · LOCAL PRODUCTION, AND THE VACCINE THAT WILL BE HOARDED

On developing local economies in response to the pandemic he is straightforwardly in favour, and offers an example that had pleased him: Nigerian Air Force aircraft distributing personal protective equipment manufactured in Nigeria to West African neighbours, in quantities large enough to give away rather than sell. He is visibly irritated that it did not reach CNN or the BBC, both of which have correspondents in the country.

The principle he takes from it is about emergencies rather than trade: when it comes to a virus, you share with your neighbours. Paracetamol and hydroxychloroquine are among the things that can be made locally.

The warning attached is about what happens at the other end of the income scale. High-income countries manufacturing vaccines and then reserving them for their own populations, or charging middle- and low-income countries vast sums for access, he calls wrong and injurious to health.

He is also careful not to turn this into autarky. Not every country can build cars, aircraft or ships; industrial capability is a function of the size of your economy. The instruction is narrower and more practical — where you have the advantage, make it yourself, and do not let importation become the default way of meeting your needs.

“When it comes to a virus, when it comes to a medical emergency, you share with your neighbours.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- The Beirut argument implies that the least profitable duties are the ones most likely to be left undone. What kind of institution is designed to do the unprofitable small thing reliably?
- He would have kept the substance of the immunity clause and struck the word sovereign. Is that a drafting point, or does the vocabulary of a contract change what a parliament is able to approve?
- If debt forgiveness is repaid in votes, then the price of a restructuring is a country's foreign policy for a decade. Should that price appear anywhere in the accounts?

- Grace as the fourth factor explains why equally able people get different outcomes. It also removes the question of who allocated the opportunities. Which of those is it doing more of?
- He wants an international convention over the technology giants — negotiated, presumably, in confidence. Is the case for closed-door diplomacy strongest exactly where the subject is public accountability?

Watch Session 10 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinights.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. Three points differ from the record and are given here as recorded rather than as spoken: the Beirut explosion had killed about 190 people at the time of this broadcast, not over a thousand, with more than six thousand injured; the ammonium nitrate had been at the port since 2013, nearer seven years than six; and Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated at Sarajevo, then in Austria-Hungary, rather than in Yugoslavia, which did not exist until 1918. Saddam Hussein's claim that the American ambassador gave him a green light is reported as his own claim; the ambassador disputed it and the released transcripts of that meeting are read both ways. The second officer the Professor says he invited into the society is not named on the recording and is not named here.

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