



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 11 · THURSDAY 13 AUGUST 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 11 · MASTER CLASS 2 OF 4

WHO DESTABILISED IT FIRST?

A running mate nobody expected, a trade agreement he has always opposed, and a chain of cause he traces from a foreign capital to a boat.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 11 — recorded two days after Kamala Harris was named as Joe Biden's running mate.

FROM THE ARCHIVE · MASTER CLASS 2 OF 4

Who Destabilised It First?

The second master class edition runs from an American withdrawal from the world, through a running mate almost nobody predicted, to the question the Channel crossings actually pose — which is not who should take these people in, but who made them leave.

A solo broadcast recorded on 13 August 2020, two days after the Democratic ticket was completed and a fortnight after the World Bank published its modelling of the African Continental Free Trade Area. **Three arguments run through it, and they are versions of one another: that leaving an institution costs you the authority you built inside it, that an agreement between unequals delivers to whoever is already ahead, and that a country which engineers instability abroad inherits the consequences at its own border.**

An archive edition, recorded 13 August 2020, in the sixth month of the Covid-19 emergency and three months before the US presidential election. Offices, figures and disputes 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 · WHAT LEAVING AN INSTITUTION ACTUALLY COSTS

The evening opens on a question held over from the previous week: has withdrawing from the Paris agreement and the World Health Organization cost the United States its position as a world power? His answer is that everybody loses, and the mechanism is the interesting part.

American values, he argues, were never adopted internationally by being asserted unilaterally. They travelled because they arrived through institutions, which allowed other countries to accept them

without appearing to submit to Washington. Withdraw from the institution and two things happen at once: the institution loses potency, and the transmission of the values becomes harder, because nobody wants to be seen succumbing to an American initiative pursued alone.

He offers the cleanest illustration of the asymmetry. Even when the United States was not persuaded of environmentalism, it found it difficult to refuse outright while the argument was being made through an international body. That is the leverage that is surrendered on the way out.

And since the system abhors a vacuum, other players move into it. His test case is the vaccine announced from Moscow, which he pointedly calls a vaccine candidate, because he has yet to meet a non-Russian scientist who accepts it. Had an American laboratory made the same announcement, there would have been suspicion of haste — and the benefit of the doubt, because of a leadership position that is not extended to Russia. Going it alone is what erodes that credit.

“It is far easier for people to accept values sponsored by the United States when the sponsorship comes through an international institution. Nobody wants to be seen succumbing to Washington alone.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • WHAT A CHANGE OF ADMINISTRATION COULD AND COULD NOT REVERSE

Asked whether any of it can be undone, he separates the easy returns from the hard one. A Biden–Harris administration would, he expects, rejoin the World Health Organization and re-embrace the Paris climate agreement without much difficulty.

The Iran agreement he treats differently. Simply walking back into it he doubts; he expects instead a fresh diplomatic effort, assisted by allies and made easier by the fact that Biden was part of the administration that negotiated the original — an attempt at the same substance with enough fine-tuning to leave American pride intact.

And he thinks the pandemic will help rather than hinder that return. Going it alone was never going to be the way out of a global emergency, which makes the walk back into some form of globalisation considerably easier to explain at home.

“Right now we have a global pandemic on our hands. Going it alone was never going to be the way out of that.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • THE RUNNING MATE HE DID NOT EXPECT

He admits without hedging that he did not put his money on Kamala Harris, and gives two reasons. The first is the primary debate, which he says wounded Biden — not only what was said but the manner of it — and which he read as a breach of a real family relationship, given the closeness between Beau Biden and Harris as fellow attorneys general. He understands the candidate's wife felt it as keenly. The second is simpler: he judged her personality much the stronger of the two.

That is why he reads the choice as a statement about Biden's character rather than about Harris's. In most systems, and he points at parliamentary democracies in particular, the winner of a leadership contest builds a cabinet by excluding the people who ran against him. Biden appears to have concluded that she would be an asset in running the country, and to have treated that as the deciding consideration.

Asked whether the primary bitterness will follow them into office, he is dismissive, and produces three precedents in a row. Kennedy and Johnson did not get on and Kennedy took him anyway. The

elder Bush called Reagan's programme voodoo economics during their contest and served as his vice-president without friction. Biden himself was sharp about Obama and then formed what he calls perhaps the best-matched pair in American history, on mutual respect. He adds a constitutional observation that few people make: the office was given almost no function beyond presiding over the Senate and breaking a tie. There is not much to fight over.

"It says a great deal about Joe Biden that he put the interest of the state above whatever he personally felt."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • WHAT THE NOMINATION SIGNALS TO EVERYONE WHO IS NOT AMERICAN

Asked whether the ticket improves Biden's chances, he answers with the fundraising: Americans put their money where their heart is, and the sum raised in the twenty-four hours after the announcement exceeded what the campaign had managed in whole months of the primaries.

Then he makes a point he says has been lost, and asks permission to take the long way round to it. Barack Obama's father was a Luo — a community that has never held the Kenyan presidency and has been kept at the margins of Kenyan politics. Kamala Harris's mother was a Tamil from southern India, from a community that is not a major player in Indian politics, and which he suspects had not much claimed her as a daughter until the nomination. He cites, without naming the parties, a discrimination suit brought in the United States by an Indian woman against an American corporation, alleging she was held back by lighter-skinned Indian colleagues.

The conclusion he draws is about America rather than about either family. A country that repeatedly elevates people whose own societies marginalised them is performing the function Reagan described as the shining city on a hill — and Americans, he adds, will take every opportunity just now to tell the world they are not what the last four years portrayed them to be.

"People who are discriminated against, despised in their own countries, come to the United States and bloom. That is the significance of this nomination to the rest of the world."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • FREE TRADE BETWEEN UNEQUALS

The moderator reads the World Bank's modelling of the African Continental Free Trade Area, including the finding that West Africa comes off worst on wages. The Professor's reply opens with a declaration of interest: he is not an admirer of the World Bank, and he cites Lee Kuan Yew's account of Singapore's development, in which rejecting the Bank's advice is given as one of the reasons the country succeeded.

His objection to the agreement is structural and long-standing — he says he has opposed it from the start, and for exactly the reason the report has now modelled. Liberalisation between parties with no parity in industrial capacity is not free trade; it is an arrangement among non-equals, and the more developed party collects the gain. Lowering tariffs and import duties at the dock, on that reading, simply opens the market to whoever already manufactures.

The evidence he cites is domestic and specific. West African tyre manufacture dating from the 1940s and 1950s, destroyed by cheap and sometimes inferior imports. Textiles — at one time, he says, the largest employer of skilled labour in Nigeria — destroyed the same way, taking the cotton production behind it down as well. He also draws a distinction worth keeping: economic

development can arrive through many channels, but industrial development is a particular thing, and imports can extinguish it while other indicators rise.

So the wage finding does not surprise him at all. It is, he says, what should have been expected.

“Until industrial capacity reaches a sustainable level you cannot have free trade. It is an agreement among non-equals, and it is the more developed who gain.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • WHY THE SAME REPORT IS WORSE FOR WOMEN

Asked whether enough is being done to bring women into development programmes, he answers no, and then declines to make it a matter of intention. Industrialists in a laissez-faire environment employ the labour that is available; the question is what makes women unavailable.

Two obstacles, in his account. The cultural expectation that women remain at home with children, which is still present across the continent and not only in West Africa. And the allocation of scarce household resources to educating sons rather than spreading them across sons and daughters.

He adds a geographical mechanism that is easy to miss and does a great deal of work. If the factory is two hundred miles away, the men travel to it and the women stay where they are. Even where the factory is local, opportunity is still not equal, because more men have been educated and hold the skills. The discrimination, he concludes, may not be deliberate. It is systemic all the same.

“It may not be deliberate. But it is systemic — and the outcome is the same.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 • ARMS IN CIVILIAN HANDS, AND WHAT THEY MEASURE

On the deaths during South Sudan's disarmament exercise, he reaches for the social contract. Citizens surrender some freedom, and their own provision of security, in exchange for protection by the state. Where the state does not deliver its side — and worse, where the danger comes from the security forces themselves as well as from neighbours — people arm themselves, and that is a measure of state failure rather than of criminality.

He is therefore unsurprised that disarmament is going badly, and says what he thinks it requires: sustained civic education from village level up, establishing not only that the state can protect you from your neighbour but that it will protect you from itself. That takes time, and it cannot be done at gunpoint.

He then adds a factor that is rarely in the official framing. Foreign agents and foreign businessmen have an interest in armed civilians, because instability is what makes extraction possible — a pattern he associates with mineral resources in Congo, and with illegal gold and diamond mining in parts of northern Nigeria, where communal instability has been actively encouraged.

On the comparison with the United States, he notes that a retired justice of the Supreme Court has argued the individual-right interpretation was wrongly decided, and that a constitutional provision written for scattered settlements does not transfer to an organised modern society. But his substantive point is about proportion rather than principle: no body of American civilians could take on the totality of American state force. Arms in civilian hands threaten stability in a developing country in a way they do not in the United States, and the difference is the strength of the state, not the number of guns.

“When citizens prefer to arm themselves for their own defence, that is a failure of the state. It is a sign that the contract has broken.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • THE CROSSINGS, AND THE QUESTION NOBODY ASKS FIRST

On migrants crossing the Channel, he refuses the framing the question arrives in. Illegal immigration is perennial, he says, because the issue has never been addressed at its cause — and the cause is not in Calais.

He starts from what it takes to make someone go. To leave loved ones, stability, language and cultural belonging, and to embark on a journey where people routinely die, requires something fundamental to have happened at home. And what he says happened, in case after case, is destabilisation engineered from abroad.

He is careful about the distinction here and it matters. Arabs love freedom as anyone does; that is not in question. What he objects to is the translation of that into armed conflict with the active involvement of foreign special forces — Libya, where the state was destroyed and the intervening parties packed up and went home; the attempt in Syria, which became a civil war with French, American, Russian, Turkish and Iranian hands in it; the second Iraq war, which he calls wholly unjustified; and the continuing war in Afghanistan.

His prescription has three parts and they are all uncomfortable. Stop interfering, even where the government concerned is a dictatorship — noting that dictatorship has coincided with stability and with the lifting of hundreds of millions out of poverty in China, and that the Soviet system, whatever else it did, did not permit oligarchs to strip the treasury and buy property abroad. If people want freedom, let them win it themselves. And if you are going to intervene anyway, go to the hilt, because a victory produces stability while a stalemate between armed factions produces boats.

The reason he addresses European rather than American citizens is geographical: the United States is distant from the Middle East and Afghanistan, and large enough to absorb what arrives, whatever the politics made of it. The final element is economic. European companies operating in developing countries often leave poverty behind and take billions home — and he is explicit that this is not an anti-capitalist argument. Fair wages for fair labour, fair profit for fair investment; a dollar in and ten million out is not fair by any construction, and the people who leave are escaping what it leaves behind. He notes the British parliamentary report's finding that oligarch money in the London property market bought a degree of official blindness, as an illustration of how the same money returns.

How an intervention becomes a boat in the Channel

The chain he traces backwards from the crossing — and the point at which he says it could be broken



"If people want freedom, let them fight for it themselves. Do not engineer it and then go home."

SESSION 11 • DIPLOMACY MASTER CLASS

As argued on this broadcast

The causal chain he traces backwards from the crossing.

09 • WHY NOT THE NEIGHBOURING COUNTRY?

A viewer asks why migrants cross country after country to reach Europe. He gives the theoretical answer first — they are heading for the stability, and the stability is in the countries whose services helped remove it at home — and then immediately complicates it with numbers.

The premise, he points out, is not quite right. Something like four million Afghans are in Pakistan, India and the neighbouring countries. France, he understands, takes in several times the number who go on to cross to Britain. Neighbours are not being spared; capacity to absorb simply differs from country to country.

He ends the argument with a name he does not quite name. The German chancellor, he says, should be praised: Germany opposed the interventionist policies in Libya and in Syria that other European governments embarked upon, and then opened the country to a million people anyway — and paid for it in electoral support. France he judges the most heavily involved in Libya and active in Syria; the Americans, the Turks, the Russians and the Iranians all in Syria; and of Israel, he says only that you never know, because everything is done quietly.

The evening ends with a question he can see coming and cannot fit in: whether democracy makes a nation weaker internationally than military rule did — put, as he notes drily, to a man who served in a military government. He asks for it to open the following week.

"There should be fair wages for fair labour and fair profit for fair investment. But you invest a dollar and take out ten million — there is nothing fair about that."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- If institutional membership is what makes a country's values portable, then leaving is a bigger concession than the treaty being left. Which of the institutions the United States remained in did the most work?
- He treats the vice-presidency as constitutionally almost empty, which is why he expects no conflict. Does that also explain why the choice functions mainly as a signal?

- The free trade objection would apply to the European single market's early years as much as to the AfCFTA. What made asymmetric integration work there, and is it available in Africa?
- Civic education is the answer he gives to disarmament, but he also says the state must prove it will not harm you. What evidence would actually establish that?
- Go to the hilt or stay out entirely is a coherent rule with a very high floor. How many of the interventions he lists would have been improved by the first branch rather than the second?

Watch Session 11 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 points are corrected against the record: the American judge who argued the individual-right reading of the Second Amendment was wrongly decided was a retired associate justice rather than a chief justice; and the \$153 billion in the World Bank's modelling is the tariff and non-tariff component rather than the projected total, which the Bank puts at around \$450 billion by 2035 under full implementation. The German chancellor praised for opposing the Libyan and Syrian interventions is not named on the recording; Angela Merkel is the referent. The parties to the discrimination suit are not named on air and are not named here.

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