



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 12 · THURSDAY 20 AUGUST 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 12 · MASTER CLASS 3 OF 4

THE CONUNDRUM HE KEEPS RAISING

Everyone condemns the coup in Mali. Nobody will say what should be done about an election that nobody believes.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 12 — recorded two days after soldiers detained Mali's president, and during the Democratic convention.

FROM THE ARCHIVE · MASTER CLASS 3 OF 4

The Conundrum He Keeps Raising

The world condemns the coup in Bamako, as it should. The Professor's question is the one nobody in the condemnation has answered: what is anybody proposing to do about an election that nobody believes?

A solo broadcast recorded on 20 August 2020, two days after mutinying soldiers detained Mali's president and forced his resignation, and midway through the Democratic National Convention. **It is the third master class edition, and the most argumentative. He refuses a viewer's case for destabilisation, refuses to romanticise coups, refuses to blame African disunity on African culture — and ends up somewhere more uncomfortable than any of those positions.**

An archive edition, recorded 20 August 2020, in the sixth month of the Covid-19 emergency. Offices, dates 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 · WHY THE SEATS ARE STILL EMPTY

A viewer argues that the international institutions were built for Eurocentric domination, that they have impoverished Africa, and that Africa therefore needs the American administration to go on destabilising them so that new powers can emerge. He rejects the conclusion first and the premise second.

He is, he says, not a disciple of destabilisation politics and has condemned it openly. Then he corrects the account. Underrepresentation is real, and its first cause is chronological: the institutions

were built at the end of the Second World War, when most African states were still colonies of Britain, France, Portugal and Spain, and could not have been treated as independent actors. Its second cause is that restructuring has in fact been accepted in principle, including by the major powers, in recognition of what medium powers contribute — not least through peacekeeping.

What has stopped it is not American obstruction. It is that the regions cannot agree who should hold the seats. Two Security Council places have broadly been conceded to Africa, and African states have not settled who occupies them; Asia is in exactly the same position, for reasons that are cultural, political and strategic all at once. In Nigeria's case he names an external factor as well: France, he says, works against Nigerian candidacy and organises other African states accordingly.

On the Bretton Woods institutions he concedes the substance of the complaint — the presidency of the World Bank reserved for the United States, the leadership of the Fund reserved by convention for Europe, both relics that should go. But he expects the fight after that concession to be among African states rather than with Washington. And he ends where he began: solutions arrived at by consensus last, however long the consensus takes.

“It is not the Americans who have prevented the restructuring. It is that we have not agreed among ourselves who would occupy the seats.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · WHY THERE IS NO AFRICAN BROTHERHOOD

Pressed on why agreement is so hard, he answers with an unusual bluntness. For all the talk of African brotherhood, brotherhood is precisely what the continent does not have.

North Africa, he argues, is organised by Arab nationalism rather than African nationalism, and sits across two regions — the Arab Middle East and the African continent — playing whichever card pays in a given contest, including for posts notionally reserved for sub-Saharan Africa. He notes, while acknowledging it is not a name that plays well in African circles, that Mobutu Sese Seko once proposed an African organisation restricted to black African states for exactly this reason.

Behind that sits a decision taken deliberately at the founding. As independence arrived between 1958 and the early 1960s, Nkrumah, Nasser and their contemporaries chose unity over division on the grounds that a united Africa would confront the rest of the world better — a judgement he treats as having been made in good faith and as having costs that are still being paid.

The third factor is the one he presses hardest. Certain European powers depend on their African-speaking territories for global standing. Without them, he says, France would be a European country on the scale of Portugal or Spain; with the resources that flow from them, it is treated as a global power. That, in his reading, is why Nigerian leadership in West Africa is something to be straitjacketed rather than accommodated.

“We talk about African brotherhood. The last thing we have on this continent is brotherhood. Let us face the fact.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 · MALI, AND THE QUESTION NOBODY WANTS

He says he expected the coup, and explains why by looking at what the ECOWAS mediation did not touch. Two fundamentals were in play. The first is that Mali's government could not confront what amounts to occupation: the north held by jihadist forces that moved into West Africa after Libya fell, after Syria, and after being pushed out of Iraq, into ground already broken by civil war. The second is

the legislative elections, which the opposition held to be neither credible nor transparent, and over which it wanted parliament dissolved and the vote rerun.

What ECOWAS offered instead was a government of national unity including opposition figures, and the opposition refused it. His observation about what happens next is stated as a general rule rather than as a comment on Mali: once the street is paralysed and disorder sets in and drags on, you are effectively inviting the one institution of order left to step in — particularly where the government's own hands are not clean.

He notes Nigeria's call to operationalise the ECOWAS standby force, and suggests that if a military option is used to restore the status quo, the election may have to be rerun anyway to placate the opposition — the thing that was refused when it would have been cheap.

Then comes the conundrum he says he has raised repeatedly, and it is the argument of the whole broadcast. We are against coups, and should be. But what is to be done about an election that lacks legitimacy, that is not transparent, that does not meet international standards? At present the pendulum sits entirely on the side of the status quo — condemn the coup, support the government of the day, because coups are out of fashion. Sooner or later, he says, the international community will have to decide what it does about the elections, and he suggests watching Belarus to see how the same problem is handled there.

“If we are against coups, as we should be — what do we do about elections that lack legitimacy? Sooner or later somebody has to answer that.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 · HAS A COUP EVER RESTRUCTURED ANYTHING?

Asked whether coups have ever amounted to national liberation, he declines to give a single answer and works through cases instead.

Some did restructure. Nasser's changed Egyptian politics fundamentally; Gaddafi's changed Libya's — although the removal of Gaddafi by outside forces has since produced a failed state. Elsewhere a coup has been merely an interregnum between civilians and civilians, changing nothing.

The distinction he draws is about the timetable, and it is the most transferable thing in the section. A military government that announces it will be gone in six months, eighteen months, three years, will simply be waited out — the politicians who created the problem sit still and outlast it. Permanent restructuring, in his account, has come where the military fixed no date and made clear it would stay as long as clearing the mess required.

On the related question of whether radical foreign policy thrives better under military rule, he gives the same shape of answer. Gaddafi in Libya, Nasser in Egypt and Murtala Muhammed in Nigeria all radicalised foreign policy on taking power. The 1966 coup in Ghana reversed Nkrumah's radicalism rather than extending it. Six of one, he concludes; there is no direct correlation.

Has a coup ever restructured anything?

The four cases he weighs when asked — and the answer he refuses to generalise

THE CASE	WHAT FOLLOWED IT	VERDICT
Egypt, 1952 Nasser	Fundamental restructuring of Egyptian politics, and a radicalised foreign policy with it.	RESTRUCTURED
Libya, 1969 Gaddafi	Restructured — until outside forces removed him, and the state failed altogether.	UNDONE LATER
Ghana, 1966 Against Nkrumah	The military reversed the radicalism rather than extending it.	REVERSED
Nigeria, 1975 Murtala Muhammed	Takeover accompanied by a radicalisation of foreign policy.	RESTRUCTURED

His rule of thumb: a military that names a date is waited out. A military that names no date is the one that changes things.

SESSION 12 · DIPLOMACY MASTER CLASS

As assessed on this broadcast

The four cases he weighs, and the rule of thumb he draws from them.

05 · EUROPE MANAGES IT. WHY CAN'T WE?

A viewer points out that Europeans are culturally diverse too and still act together through the European Union, and asks whether something in African culture prevents it. He rejects the framing immediately and answers with a single word: interference.

His first example is European. When it appeared that communist and radical forces might take power in post-war Italy, American intelligence intervened in the election — and Europe, he notes drily, was left alone afterwards to build. Africa never has been. He anticipates the objection to that argument and states it himself: sixty years after independence it can sound like an excuse. He says it anyway, because he thinks it is true.

The documentation he points to is the Church Committee's report to the United States Senate, which set out covert intervention in Africa and in Latin America, and the memoirs of the former CIA officer John Stockwell. His cases are the Congo, where a plot against Lumumba was mounted and where the country has never been left alone because of what is under its ground, and Togo, where he says French hands were behind the killing of Sylvanus Olympio and the installation of a former sergeant of the French army whose son still holds the presidency.

The mechanism he describes is what makes the argument bite. Any African leader who becomes too militant, or begins to show the capacity to gather African sentiment behind him, becomes a target — and there are always enough buyable elements inside an army to arrange it.

“The moment the West sees an African leader who is beginning to gather African sentiment together, a coup is organised. There are always enough elements in the army to buy.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · MONITORS, EMBASSIES, AND THE LINE BETWEEN THEM

Asked where monitoring ends and interference begins, he says the line is fluid and then draws it anyway. He supports international monitoring, given the history of manipulation by incumbents and the capacity to interfere with the count.

What he objects to is not the monitors but the embassies. Going around a country indicating how the electorate ought to vote is not monitoring; it is advocacy for a party or a person, and he says plainly that it irritates him.

On the monitoring itself he speaks from inside it. He has served on missions — the presidential election in The Gambia, which he headed, and the election that brought Zimbabwe to independence — and says no mission he was part of had any mandate to intervene, but that the presence of observers at polling stations moderated what electoral officers might otherwise have attempted. The exercise, in his judgement, adds credibility.

The report afterwards, he adds, achieves very little. A mission can find an election neither free nor fair and the declared winner will simply get on with governing, leaving the matter to the courts — which is why the interventions that actually mattered recently were judicial, in Malawi and in Kenya, where the supreme courts ordered fresh presidential elections.

And on why it is Africa that gets monitored at all, he gives no comfort. African governments are capable of running credible, transparent elections and have so far preferred not to. By not letting their own electoral institutions do the job, they invited the monitors in. He notes that the visitors have generally been respectful — a former American president has led a delegation to Nigeria — and that African heads of state serve on African Union and ECOWAS missions in turn. But the invitation, he says, was ours.

“Why is Africa the experimental stage for this? Because our own governments prefer not to run credible elections. We invited it on ourselves.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · WHY A JOB AFTER OFFICE IS A SECURITY INSTITUTION

The moderator raises British parliamentary second jobs, and the lucrative afterlives of former ministers. The Professor's answer runs in the opposite direction to the one the question expects, and it is the most original argument of the evening.

The private-sector afterlife, he says, is an institution that does two protective jobs. First, it insulates former officials from foreign intelligence recruitment. A minister lives at a certain level in office; if that collapses the moment the office ends, the person becomes available — and foreign services do not arrive with an offer of espionage, they arrive with a consultancy, an advisory retainer, a position in a company abroad, all of it purchased access to what was learned in office. If your own national companies can engage you instead, the offer from outside is easy to refuse.

Second, it reduces the incentive to steal while in office. Someone who knows there is a livelihood afterwards has less reason to build a nest egg in offshore accounts against the day the car and the house go back.

He therefore urges developing-country governments to build the same institution deliberately — board and consultancy positions for people who have left office. He is candid that these are sinecures. His argument is that they are also, in his phrase, part of the constituted defence of your own country's system.

The moderator pushes back well: many leaders in developing countries have never advanced on merit and would bring nothing to a board. His reply is that this is to misunderstand what a board member does. They transfer status and gravitas — from having been a permanent secretary, a general, a minister — and the decisions continue to be taken by the professionals who run the business. He has met former European ministers leading trade delegations and been left in no doubt that the officials behind them wrote the brief.

“If your standard of living crashes the day you leave office, you become available. Somebody will offer you a consultancy — and what they are buying is what you know.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • THE CONVENTION, AND THE NARROWING POLLS

On the Democratic convention he is frankly moved, and says so. The speeches were fluent and focused, and their message to the world was that this is not the America you knew, that it is an aberration, and that policies are coming which will make the country acceptable in the world community again. Listening, he says, his mind went back to Kennedy's inaugural — delivered with a style that made a non-American feel like a fellow occupant of the planet. He mentions, in passing and without elaborating, that he met Kennedy at the White House in 1962, when he was twenty, and that it is a story for another time.

Asked whether the convention will move people who do not normally vote Democratic, he points to Republicans campaigning openly for the ticket under the Lincoln banner — Lincoln still standing in American mythology for the Republican party of hope — and to the money raised.

Then the caution, and it is the part that reads most sharply from a distance. He is surprised and depressed by how the polls have narrowed, with something like forty-six per cent still prepared to vote for the incumbent, when he had expected the gap to be enormous given how obvious the differences are.

On the President's statement that he could only lose a rigged election, he is unsparing, and cites the arrest that day of a former White House adviser on money laundering charges — a man he says was too much even for the administration that hired him, and who had been touring Europe encouraging right-wing movements. It is, he says, like a man who is cheating accusing everyone else of cheating.

Asked directly whether Africa's interests would be served by the incumbent winning, he does not hedge. He sticks his neck out for Biden and Harris — and adds, for the record, that they were not his favourites among the candidates who ran in the primaries.

“It is like somebody who is cheating accusing other people of cheating. I am not surprised.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He says consensus solutions last longer. But the two African seats have been available in principle for years without consensus. At what point does the cost of waiting exceed the value of agreement?
- If France's global standing depends on its African relationships, then Nigerian leadership is a threat to a permanent Security Council member. What follows from that for reform?
- The conundrum has an uncomfortable corollary: any rule that lets an illegitimate election be undone by force can be invoked by anyone willing to call an election illegitimate. Is there a version that does not?
- The timetable rule implies that the coups which changed things were the ones that refused to leave. Is that an argument for open-ended military rule, or an argument against expecting coups to fix anything?

- Board seats as a defence against recruitment and corruption is an elegant case — and describes a system in which the people who regulated an industry are later paid by it. What would keep the second effect from swallowing the first?

Watch Session 12 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. Three points are corrected against the record: Sylvanus Olympio was assassinated in January 1963, not 1962 or 1964; the leadership of the International Monetary Fund is reserved by convention for a European rather than specifically for France; and the Church Committee found that a CIA plot against Patrice Lumumba existed but concluded the agency was not directly responsible for the killing, which was carried out in Katanga. French organisation of the Togolese coup is his account rather than an established finding. The former adviser arrested on the day of broadcast is described but not named on the recording; Steve Bannon is the referent, charged that day with conspiracy to commit wire fraud and money laundering.

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