



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 19 · THURSDAY 8 OCTOBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 19

THEY FELT THE MOMENT WAS RIPE

A plot to seize a governor, a president on steroids, and a warning about where a country goes once politics stops being an argument.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 19 — recorded the day six men were charged with plotting to kidnap the governor of Michigan.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

They Felt The Moment Was Ripe

A president discharged from hospital against advice, a plot to seize a sitting governor, and the observation that ties them together — that people read their environment before they act, and someone had told them what the environment was.

A solo broadcast recorded on 8 October 2020: six days after the American president tested positive, a day after the vice-presidential debate, and on the morning the Michigan kidnapping charges were unsealed. **The evening ranges from Washington to Rome to Brussels to Ascension Island, but the through-line is the same everywhere — what a country signals from the top, and what people down the line take that signal to permit.**

An archive edition, recorded 8 October 2020, in the eighth month of the Covid-19 emergency and four weeks before the US presidential election. Figures, offices and disputes are described as they stood that week; where the Professor's statements differ from the record — including on a medical question — the correction is set beside them rather than left implicit.

01 · A CLAIM ABOUT A DRUG, AND WHAT THE TRIALS FOUND

Asked whether he was surprised by the President's infection, he says he was — because the President had said he was taking hydroxychloroquine, and, in the Professor's account, the drug has been found efficacious in Nigeria if taken early enough, while quinine is used routinely in malarial areas. He adds that the American press, determined to prove the President wrong on everything, would not examine the question fairly.

This issue does not reproduce that as a medical claim, and the reason is worth stating plainly. By the summer of 2020 the question had been settled by large randomised trials rather than by press coverage: the British RECOVERY trial and the World Health Organization's Solidarity trial both found no benefit in hospitalised patients, and the American regulator revoked the drug's emergency authorisation in June. Trials of early and preventive use reported the same. The Professor's inference — that a man on an effective prophylactic should not have caught the virus — rests on a premise the evidence does not support.

It is included here because it is what he said, and because the reasoning around it is characteristic and worth seeing: an entirely fair suspicion of coverage driven by hostility to its subject, applied to a question that coverage happened to have got right.

“The American press was determined that on every issue he would be proven wrong — and on this medication they were determined not to go into the efficacy of it.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • THE DRIVE, AND THE DRUGS

On the motorcade that left the military hospital so that the President could wave at supporters, he is unequivocal: not a sign of strength, a sign of recklessness. Then he supplies the frame he thinks is missing.

The patient was on a combination of drugs that had never been used that way before and had not been approved by the regulator, singly or together, including steroids. What worries him is the effect of that combination on the President's mental capability — which is, he thinks, why a man is doing things a normal person would not do: the drive against medical advice, and then discharging himself and going home.

He sets the behaviour against the count. More than two hundred thousand dead in the United States by that week, more than a million worldwide. Something, he says, is strange in the reaction — and he is careful to attribute the strangeness to the medication rather than to the man.

“He was on a cocktail of drugs never used that way before, and on steroids. I am worried about the effect of all that on his mental capability.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • THE ELECTION HE THINKS IS ALREADY OVER

Asked whether the infection is the final straw, he refuses the premise politely. If he were writing a thesis he would list it as a contributing factor. As an assessment, it is beside the point: the election, he says, was already lost — nationally and in the states that matter, the gap is beyond catching.

What the illness and the behaviour since have done is widen the margin, not change the result.

On the withdrawal from the second debate, announced that day, he declines the obvious reading. It is not a surrender; it is the same irrational reaction he has been describing. No doctor, he says, would have advised debating. People do not shake off this infection and resume business — he has seen what prominent patients, prime ministers and presidents among them, looked like a month afterwards. And he points, as anyone watching had, to the breathing on the White House balcony after the walk up the stairs: a man who could not draw one complete breath, and who does not look well in any footage since.

“Whether he caught it or not, the election was already lost. What this has done is widen the margin.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • TWO WARNINGS FOR THE WINNING SIDE

Asked what the Democrats should do now, he gives two instructions and no encouragement.

The first is about tone: no Schadenfreude. Rejoicing at a calamity is the thing they can most easily be caught out on.

The second is about litigation, and it is the more urgent. He was shocked by the Supreme Court order a few days earlier reinstating a requirement that absentee ballots carry a witness signature — a court, he says, with a record of whittling down voting rights in ways that fall on minorities. Roughly two million people had already voted. The order carried a carve-out for ballots already cast and those cast within two days, which he treats as a palliative rather than an answer: why not simply say the question would be examined after the election, rather than changing conditions in the middle of the voting?

His practical advice follows: empanel the brainiest lawyers available, across the whole country, and keep watch not only on the third of November but from now until a week after it.

“You cannot start considering conditions in the middle of the voting process. Why could they not say: we will look at this after the election?”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • WHY THE DEPUTIES WERE CIVIL

He was not surprised that the vice-presidential debate was calm: both participants would react against the hooliganism of the first, and both had reasons of their own. Harris, with her side ahead in the polls, had nothing to gain from anything that might move them. Pence had a different constraint entirely.

The Professor's assessment of the Vice-President is the sharpest in the section and is offered with more sympathy than contempt: probably one of the most unfortunate men to hold that office, because he is not his own man and cannot know what he can safely say. He has watched officials who disagreed with the President cut off at the knee, publicly, on Twitter.

On substance, Harris set out the policy parameters her running mate would implement. Pence had less: the economy, which was his side's strength, had gone haywire, and blaming the pandemic for it would have opened the reply that it was the handling of the pandemic rather than the pandemic itself. He notes that Harris, a formidable cross-examiner in Senate hearings on judicial nominations, did not use her knuckles — and still took the instant polls by roughly twenty points. She won, he says, without pushing her luck.

“When you serve under this President you must be careful not to outshine him. He is a very insecure man.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • THE DEPUTIES MATTERED THIS TIME

The received wisdom is that a running mate never wins an election. He thinks this time is different, and the reason he gives is unsentimental to the point of bluntness: two elderly principals, one of them currently ill.

So in a great many American sitting rooms that night, people were watching out of the corner of their eye and asking whether either of these two could step into the office if something happened. That is not morbid, he says; it is the situation.

His verdicts follow from that test. Harris reassured the people who needed reassuring that she could do the job. Pence did not quite — not, he stresses, because he could not have, but because of the constraint already described. He says he feels sorry for him.

“Two principals, both old, one of them sick. People were watching to see which of these two could step into that office.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · PEOPLE REACT TO THEIR ENVIRONMENT

The charges unsealed that morning stop him. Not talk, he says — a militia caught in the act of preparation: surveillance mounted on officials' houses, explosives sought, a plan to seize not only the governor but senior state officials, a month before a presidential election, in a country that would have been thrown into chaos had it succeeded.

His first response is to credit the professionals, and he explains why he is careful to do so: he comes from a developing country, and there is a need to caution against copycats. The security agencies penetrated the group, watched it long enough to gather evidence, and took it in the act. That deserves recognition.

His second response is the one that gives the issue its title. American institutions and politicians have always had political differences, and were always united in loyalty to the country. What has changed is that dissension has reached a point where a group could read the atmosphere as ripe — could believe that succeeding at this would make them heroes. People react to their environment, he says, and you must not miss that point.

The remedy he names is a Republican one, and he names names to make it unmistakable: go back to the United States of Eisenhower, of Kennedy, of Reagan, of the Bushes, of Obama — and of McCain, a man who lost and remained patriotic and decent. Where, he asks, are the people in that party who will take a lesson from the McCains, from the Reagans, from Lincoln?

And the argument he puts to them is not moral but familial. If a civil war breaks out on American streets between militias of the right and militias of the left, their own families will be among the victims. Politics stops somewhere. It looks to him as though there are people determined to drive the country over the precipice over disagreements about politics, and he says the word he means: frightening.

People react to their environment

The rungs he traces from ordinary political anger to militia on the streets

HIGHEST

5 Militia against militia on American streets — and their own families among the victims.

4 Surveillance on officials' homes. Explosives bought. Six men charged.

3 A group concludes the atmosphere is ripe — that success would make them heroes.

2 Officials who disagree are cut off at the knee, publicly, from the top.

LOWEST

1 Political disagreement — which every country has, and which is not the problem.

"They must have felt the environment was ripe enough for them to come out as heroes. People react to their environment."

SESSION 19 • THEY FELT THE MOMENT WAS RIPE

As argued on this broadcast

The rungs he traces, and the one he says a country can still stand on.

08 • POPES HAVE ALWAYS BEEN POLITICAL

Asked whether the new encyclical is a signal, he deflates the premise expertly. All popes are political figures, and always have been; they express themselves through encyclicals and through the Sunday message from the window. And the Pope is not only head of a church but head of a state — he wears two birettas. There is nothing strange in it.

What he does find striking, and entirely proper, is the refusal to receive the American Secretary of State during his visit to Rome. He blames the visitor rather than the host. You do not seek an audience with a head of state in the middle of your own election — particularly when you have already inserted yourself into that election by addressing your party's convention, which serving cabinet members have by tradition and convention avoided.

He adds the honest qualification. When popes speak on the environment or on gender they open themselves to criticism, and they receive it — this one and his predecessors. He notes that John Paul II was the more activist of the two, on the right on some questions and closer to the left on others. None of it, he says, is a surprise.

"Apart from being head of the Catholic Church, the Pope is head of a state. He wears two hats, and every pope has used them."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • ON BREAKING AN AGREEMENT YOU SIGNED

On the European Commission's legal action over the Internal Market Bill, he begins with the general point: anyone who thought leaving would be smooth has had a rude awakening, and unwinding a relationship of that complexity taxes the capability, intelligence, energy and diplomatic skill of both sides.

What it cannot be, he says, is subjected to bullying. He grants the domestic logic — a prime minister wanting to show his public that Britain can stand its own — and then makes the arithmetical point that logic ignores: one country against continental Europe is not a balance of weights.

The damage he identifies is reputational and lasting. Break an agreement you freely entered into and you undermine your own credibility as a partner anyone can negotiate with. It may be a tactic. It is not one he would have advised.

The concrete consequence he sketches is the lorries at Dover, suddenly facing hundreds of documents before they can move in either direction, at a moment when the pandemic has wrecked economies on both sides. And he notes what the asymmetry means in practice: the Union is twenty-seven countries and can take more punches than one country can.

“Once you break an agreement you freely entered into, you undermine your own credibility as a partner who can be negotiated with.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 · WHY BRUSSELS WILL NOT BE GENEROUS

Asked what lesson other countries contemplating referendums should draw, he says two things, and the second is the more important.

The first is about honesty at home. He accepts entirely that a referendum result must be respected — provided you have told your people the truth about the consequences of what they are voting for.

The second is about why the other side will play hard. Brussels cannot be seen to be soft, because softness invites the next member with a grievance to try the same thing. But underneath the economics is something he thinks is consistently underrated: the Union began, through coal and steel, out of the destruction of two world wars, and it exists to ensure there is no third war on European soil. Whatever Britain sacrificed in that war, it does not compare with what the mainland had done to it — and that memory is why the Union will go the extra mile to prevent fragmentation.

His closing line on referendums is characteristically economical: once you have scrambled eggs, you cannot unscramble them.

“Respect the result — provided you told your people the truth about the consequences. Once you have scrambled the eggs you cannot unscramble them.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

11 · A VOLCANIC ISLAND, AND A FAMILY THAT WAS LET IN

On the reported proposal to process asylum seekers on Ascension Island, he does not begin with the policy. He begins with the minister, and the fact that she is the daughter of a family that moved from India to Uganda and from Uganda to Britain — a family, in his phrase, that has been the beneficiary of the hospitality of two continents.

Two questions follow, and he asks them rather than asserting the answers. Do people forget their own history once they are in office? Does power actually destroy the humanity in people?

Then the test he sets, which is the argument of the section: if, when Asians were arriving from Uganda, the Home Secretary of the day had produced a blueprint to relocate them to a volcanic island, how would they have felt?

He widens it to the country. This is a nation that went out into the world and populated the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and others — now to be associated with even the thought of what he declines to call anything but a camp.

And he reaches for the recent precedent rather than the distant one. The Windrush scandal, under a Home Secretary who went on to be prime minister: people brought to Britain after the war on promises, to help rebuild it, and then, decades later, doors knocked on and people dragged out and flown back to countries they had left at twelve or sixteen and did not recognise. That scandal, he

notes, is still there. It does not speak well of the United Kingdom, and it does not speak well of the governing party.

“Do people forget their history once they are in office? Does power actually destroy the humanity in people?”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

12 • TWO WOMEN, AND THE ARITHMETIC OF AMERICAN SUPPORT

On the World Trade Organization race, now down to two candidates, he starts by praising the process: rules followed, procedure observed, and nobody threatening to reject the outcome — a standard he has spent months noting the absence of elsewhere.

On the fact that both finalists are women he is precise about what is and is not being celebrated. They were picked on capability and on merit, not because of their gender — and, crucially, not disqualified because of it. That, he says, is where discrimination actually operates: pushing extremely qualified people into the background unjustly. Both are exceptionally well qualified and the organisation is in good hands either way.

He declares his interest — as a Nigerian he thinks Dr. Okonjo-Iweala would do a superb job — and notes, without disapproval, that she has taken American citizenship, which he reads as insurance against being discounted for being merely Nigerian.

The closing analysis is pure Realpolitik and applies well beyond this contest. American opposition to a candidate for an international post does not make success impossible, but it makes the job harder, and how much harder depends on how hard Washington is prepared to lean on its allies. The WTO decides by consensus and, failing that, by qualified voting. Which is why states nominate people they think the Americans can live with. And the timing matters: even if the election changes the administration, the new one does not arrive until January — so on this decision, it is still the current President who calls it.

“Discrimination is when you push extremely qualified people into the background unjustly. These two were picked on merit, and not disqualified for their gender.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He distrusts coverage driven by hostility to its subject — a sound instinct that, on the drug question, pointed the wrong way. How should a commentator weigh motivated reporting against the underlying evidence?
- If the environment is what militias read, the people who set the environment are more consequential than the people who act on it. Does that change what should be prosecuted, or only what should be condemned?
- He asks Republicans to reclaim their own tradition. Which of the figures he names — Eisenhower, Reagan, McCain — would that party recognise as its own today?
- The European Union's founding purpose was to prevent a third war rather than to build a market. How much of the Brexit negotiation was conducted on the wrong understanding of what the other side was defending?
- A minister whose family was admitted proposes to exclude. Is that irony evidence of anything, or does it merely make the policy easier to talk about?

Watch Session 19 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. One correction is made in the body rather than the footer because it is a medical question: hydroxychloroquine was found ineffective against Covid-19 in the large randomised trials reported before this broadcast, and the American regulator revoked its emergency authorisation in June 2020. Two smaller points: the British Home Secretary's parents left Uganda for Britain in the 1960s, before the 1972 expulsion, and she was herself born in London; and the instant polling after the vice-presidential debate gave Harris fifty-nine per cent to Pence's thirty-eight, close to the figures he recalls. The World Trade Organization outcome he anticipates was blocked by the United States later that month and settled the following February.

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