



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 22 · THURSDAY 29 OCTOBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 22

THE MAJOR ACTORS ARE NOT TWO

Five days before the American election, he refuses the two-party map — and names the coalition he thinks the republic is relying on.

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Syncterface Media · tmeinsights.com

Session 22 — recorded five days before the American election, at the programme's new hour.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

The Major Actors Are Not Two

Five days out, he refuses the two-party map of the American election and offers a five-part one instead — then explains why the smallest of the five carries more weight than its numbers, and what a refusal to concede would actually set off.

A solo broadcast recorded on 29 October 2020, the first at the programme's new hour after the British clocks changed: five days before the American election, three days after the shooting in Philadelphia, and on the day a former British opposition leader was suspended by his own party. **The evening's through-line is the one he has been building all autumn — that the interesting question about a protest movement is not what it demands but where its energy is allowed to go.**

An archive edition, recorded 29 October 2020, in the ninth month of the Covid-19 emergency. Offices, contests and figures are described as they stood that week; where the Professor's attributions differ from the record, the correction is noted rather than quietly fixed — including one he flags himself while making it.

01 · IT IS USUALLY THE YOUNG WHO STEP FORWARD

Asked whether the protests spreading across countries are a new phenomenon, he takes the step backwards he always takes. The people who fought the First World War were young. So were the people who fought the Second. So were the civil rights marchers of the 1960s, the anti-war demonstrators, and the crowds in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

So he is not surprised that this is a period of the young, and he expects another in twenty or thirty years — when today's protesters are parents and their children are on the streets.

But the useful half of the answer is the appeal attached to it, addressed to whoever is in a position to act on it. Make provision for that energy to be channelled into public policy. Do not only hear these voices in the street: hear them in parliament, in cabinet, on the judicial bench, wherever policy is actually made.

His examples are pointedly non-partisan. He notes the relative youth of the American Supreme Court appointments made under the outgoing president — while saying, in the same breath, that he does not like their policies or their judicial orientation and is referring only to their age. And he notes that in Nigeria, where states have been asked to set up judicial panels on police misconduct, some panel members have been nominated by the young themselves.

“It is usually the youths who step forward when things are not going right.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · CAN IT BE SUSTAINED?

Asked whether protest on this scale can be kept up, he says plainly that he does not have an answer — and then gives the observation that stands in for one. The Black Lives Matter protests have faded, in the United States and in Britain. One reading is that the American energy was diverted into voter registration.

What he refuses is the conclusion that fading means failing. Movements do not really die out; they plant seeds of reform that wait for an opportunity to sprout. And they have effects in the meantime — young people have been elected to Congress across the country.

He is realistic about where that does not happen. Some political systems are so fossilised, so controlled by the ancients of days, that the young simply keep banging their heads against the door.

The optimistic note he ends on is technological rather than political, and it is an interesting bet. Organisations have begun opening up, and as the world becomes more technological, governments and institutions will need people who can operate in it. We are moving from a paper civilisation to a digital one, and in that transition the young have the advantage.

“They never really die out. They plant seeds of reform, and the seeds wait for an opportunity to sprout again.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 · WHY THE BALLOT DEADLINE IS A PROTEST QUESTION

More than half of the entire 2016 turnout had already voted with six days to go, and the young were a large part of it. He treats this as the answer to his own appeal: protest on the street and participation in the process, at once.

His account of 2016 is the standard one and he says so: the young did not turn out, and most analysts count that among the reasons for an unexpected result. He extends it to the British referendum, where the same charge was made — that young people who assumed nobody sensible would vote to leave did not vote at all.

Then the conditional that makes the section matter. If you want to keep the young engaged, they must see that their votes were counted. Which turns the litigation then before the Supreme Court — over how many days after election day a postmarked ballot may still be counted — into something much larger than a procedural argument. If the young conclude that their postal votes were wasted, they may go back to the streets.

And he widens the frame past the presidency, in a passage that reads as instruction rather than commentary. The Senate, the House, the state assemblies and the governorships all matter — because changing the size of the Supreme Court requires both chambers, and constitutional change requires the states. If the youth vote counts and those institutions turn, then other countries may start to look at the United States as a model for absorbing youth activism rather than as a warning.

“If the youth conclude that their postal votes have been wasted, they may decide to go back to the streets.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • FIVE ACTORS, NOT TWO

Asked about the challenges facing the Republican party, he corrects the question — let us talk about the challenges facing the republic — and produces the taxonomy the issue is named for. The major actors are not two. He counts the Democrats; the Abraham Lincoln Republicans; the Renaissance Republicans; the ordinary, decent Republicans; and a fifth group he names in terms Americans do not like hearing.

He anticipates the objection and answers it with evidence rather than assertion: a country in which armed men on the streets carry the swastika and the other insignia of the German original cannot deny that it has visible admirers of it. If America is to redeem its image, that element — and the racism alongside it — has to be dealt with.

What he says next is the structural claim, and it is the one worth arguing with. That group's influence is out of proportion to its numbers, and the mechanism is the electoral college.

His case against the college is made as a confession about his own discipline. Were any other country using such a system, the United States would be at the forefront of those arguing that it was not democracy and showed no respect for votes. Because it is American, political scientists — himself included — have let it creep into the working definition of democracy. He calls it an anachronism, and points out that without it the popular-vote winner of 2016 would have taken office.

The practical suggestion follows from the arithmetic he has just given. A substantial victory by a coalition of the Democrats and the two Republican tendencies that have declared against the incumbent might make abrogation of the college thinkable — which is why the state legislatures matter.

Five actors, not two

His map of the American electorate, given five days before the vote



Small in number. Amplified, he argues, by the electoral college.

THE COALITION HE SAYS THE REPUBLIC IS RELYING ON

“The major actors on the American political scene are not two. There are several.” Widths illustrate his description; he gave no figures.

05 · "THE UNTHINKABLE HAS BECOME THINKABLE"

On the possibility that the incumbent might refuse to accept defeat, he opens with the sentence that dates the whole broadcast: ten years ago his answer would have been, are you kidding me — we are talking about the United States, not a banana republic somewhere.

He notes, with the plainness of someone who has watched it happen nearer home, that in Africa leaders who refused results have ended up before the International Criminal Court, and says he hopes that is not anyone's fate here.

His scenario runs through the Supreme Court, because he expects both parties to take it there. And what he says would follow if the Court upheld a refusal on grounds of fraud is a prediction of disorder rather than a call for it, and should be read that way: he would not be surprised to see the Court itself attacked, and suspects the American military would be reluctant to be used against the crowds.

Which is why, he says, the coalition matters. The fight is not between two parties. It is the rest of the spectrum against one end of it.

"Ten years ago I would have said: are you kidding me? Now the unthinkable has become thinkable."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · BOTH SIDES OF THE BALANCE

Asked again about Mali, he declines to revisit settled ground and instead gives the general rule in one pass — and it is the tidiest statement of a case he has been making for months.

Mali, Guinea and Kyrgyzstan are all versions of the same conflict: the sanctity of the electoral process against the sanctity of governance. Democracy, he says, is not only about elections; it is about governance. The charters and constitutions of these countries all require governments to obey their courts, to obey their own constitutions, and not to extend their tenure.

The cases differ in which failure predominates — a corrupt electoral process in one, tenure elongation plus a constitutional amendment in another, an electoral process lacking credibility in the third — but the family resemblance is the point.

And so is the symmetry he demands, which is the passage worth quoting to any international body. Condemn tenure elongation as you condemn violence on the streets. Condemn a corrupt electoral process as you condemn the coup that removes a corrupt government. Two sides of the same balance.

"You must condemn elongation of terms just as you condemn violence on the streets. Two sides of the balance."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · WHY A FORMER PRESIDENT BROKE THE CONVENTION

On a former president campaigning openly against a successor, he confirms the convention — they do not do this — and then explains why he thinks it was set aside, reaching for Paine: these are the times that try men's souls.

What is at stake, on his reading, is not a legacy. He repeats the five-part taxonomy for the avoidance of doubt and then states the conclusion it was built for: the republic is in danger. That, he thinks, is what brought the former president off the sidelines.

Whether it will help substantially he declines to guess — that is a judgement for the morning after — while noting that the man remains extremely popular.

He then takes up, and partly dismantles, a thesis he clearly finds plausible: that alarm among white Americans at a black presidency is what powered the successor's candidacy. His counter is elegantly simple. If the first election was something that slipped by, what about the second one?

“If the first election of Obama was a mistake, something that slipped by — how about the second time?”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • WHAT THE YOUNG ACTUALLY CONTRIBUTED

Asked whether youth movements change how states conduct foreign policy, he first makes a correction that is generous to the previous generation and unusual in this debate.

We are, he says, in danger of thinking the young created the awareness. They did not. Concern for the climate, for animal rights, for the environment has existed for decades. What the young brought was urgency and passion — and, in the case of police brutality, the force to make a government treat it as a first-order priority.

What has surprised and saddened him is the pushback, and he is specific that he means Britain as well as America. He had expected a message to go out from chief constables and commissioners to everyone in uniform: times have changed, and the force itself will no longer tolerate certain conduct. He expected, in a word, a mea culpa. Instead the unions pushed back.

He is careful about the balance — he knows there are decent officers facing daily danger — and precise about the harm: a few are giving the rest a very bad name, and rather than keeping their heads down they are resisting the reforms.

The foreign policy consequence is the answer to the original question, and it is a real one. Diaspora activism has made police conduct an international matter. A government that will not deal with it faces embarrassment abroad — at elections it wants to contest, over resolutions it wants to promote — and awkward questions about what its police are doing to its own young.

“Awareness of these issues existed for decades. What the youth brought was urgency, and passion.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • FREE SPEECH, AND THE THEATRE

On the suspension of a former British opposition leader that day, he starts with liberalism's standing conundrum: it believes in free speech and free political action, and has repeatedly been confronted with the excesses of both — excesses that in living memory produced Nazism in Germany and fascism in Italy, the treatment of the Jews, and eventually the whole category of hate speech.

His legal illustration is the famous one, and he flags his own uncertainty about who said it while insisting the point stands: freedom of speech does not extend to shouting fire in a crowded theatre when you know it will cause a stampede and cost lives. He was right about the point and wrong about the judge, which he had allowed for.

So the party may reasonably have concluded that anything read as diminishing the danger is itself a danger — to its own health and to the country's, given how many British lives were lost fighting the original. On that basis he does not regard the action as a threat to free speech at all.

And then, in one sentence, he asks for the standard to be applied evenly — which is the sentence the section exists for.

“I also wish they would turn the same searchlight onto racism. Racism is just as dangerous as anti-semitism.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • GROWTH WITH A REPUTATIONAL BILL ATTACHED

On the forecast that China will be the only major economy to grow in 2020, he finds the explanation in factories rather than in policy: Chinese production of protective equipment went into overdrive at a moment when, for something like six months, the world had nowhere else to buy it.

The economics are straightforward. What interests him is the account that will be presented afterwards, and here he is unusually blunt about the cost of a good year: it is unfortunate for China that its growth will be seen to rest on profiting from the pandemic.

He expects three consequences, and they have aged well. Anti-Chinese sentiment will rise. China will not gain politically or morally from the figures. And the fact will be used in the last days of an American campaign — after which even a new administration will be under pressure not to be seen embracing a country perceived to have benefited.

He adds the point most carefully, because it is the one most easily misread. This will strengthen the conspiracy theory that the virus was released deliberately — a theory he says plainly he does not believe.

“It is unfortunate for China that its growth will be seen to depend on profiting from Covid-19.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

11 • A BOTTLE IN THE FRIDGE

Put on the spot for a prediction, he answers with the best-humoured passage in the archive. In 2016 he went to bed with a bottle of chilled champagne in the fridge and woke up looking for paracetamol.

This time he will go to bed on Tuesday night expecting to be on the side of the angels — and, he says, the angels are not going to let him down.

The disclaimer he attaches is the properly scholarly one. If he is wrong, it will not be his fault. It will be the fault of the Americans.

“I went to bed with a bottle of chilled champagne and woke up looking for paracetamol. This time I am on the side of the angels.”

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THREADS TO PULL

- He asks institutions to make room for youth energy rather than meet it in the street. Which institutions in your own country have actually done that, and what did it cost them?
- The electoral college argument turns on a discipline having naturalised something it would criticise anywhere else. Where else has political science done that?

- Naming a domestic faction after a foreign regime is a rhetorical decision as well as an analytical one. Does it clarify the phenomenon or make it easier to dismiss?
- Condemning tenure elongation as loudly as coups would put a great many sitting governments in the dock. Is that the reason no international body does it?
- He credits earlier generations with the awareness and the young with the urgency. Does that division survive contact with movements whose whole claim is that the earlier generation was not listening?

Watch Session 22 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. Two attributions are corrected: the line about shouting fire in a crowded theatre is Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. in *Schenck v. United States* (1919), not Felix Frankfurter — the Professor flags his own uncertainty about the name while making the point — and the standard it set was substantially narrowed by *Brandenburg v. Ohio* (1969). One factual point does not fit: the Kyrgyz president in office during the October 2020 crisis had held the office since 2017, so the description of a president there “for eternity” applies to other cases in his list rather than to that one. The segment widths on the chart illustrate his description of the five groups; he gave no figures and none should be read from them.*

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