



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

SESSION 23 · THURSDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2020 · FROM THE ARCHIVE · Syncterface Media

FROM THE ARCHIVE · SESSION 23

I AM IN A MOOD OF LAMENTATION

Two days after the American election, with the count still running, he declines to celebrate the result he expects — and explains why.

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Session 23 — recorded two days after the American election, with the count still running.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

I Am In A Mood Of Lamentation

He called the result correctly and refuses to enjoy it. The distress is not about who won but about how many voted the other way, how long the counting is taking, and what a man who cannot lose gracefully can still achieve by losing slowly.

A solo broadcast recorded on 5 November 2020, two days after the American presidential election and before any result had been declared. The moderator opens by warning viewers that the bangs audible from the London studio are Guy Fawkes fireworks. **The Professor had predicted the outcome a week earlier and expected to be celebrating. He is not. What follows is the most personal political grief in the archive, delivered by a man who met Kennedy at twenty and has measured his life against that country ever since.**

An archive edition, recorded 5 November 2020, with the American count incomplete. Vote totals cited on air are running totals as they stood that evening rather than final figures, and are corrected in the closing note. Elsewhere, where the Professor's recollections differ from the record, the correction is set out rather than quietly fixed.

01 · WHY HE IS NOT CELEBRATING

Asked how the election looks, he gives the projection in a sentence — the indications point to Biden — and then says he is not interested in it, because he is distressed by the result itself and by the process around it.

The word he chooses is lamentation, and he repeats it four times: for his own generation, for Americans, for the younger generation, for the world.

The cause is the count on the other side. Something like sixty-seven or sixty-eight million people had by that evening voted for the incumbent — and his objection is not to any electoral gimmickry but to the four-year record. A man who, on the tapes a book was built from, knew what the virus would do and let people take no precautions. A man he describes as believing in nothing except himself.

And then the charge he presses hardest, which is about memory rather than policy. The United States sent its young men to Europe to fight Nazism and left them in cemeteries across the continent — a struggle, as he puts it, consecrated by American blood. To allow the swastika to be paraded on American streets is to desecrate that.

He had expected a resounding denunciation. He got, on his reading, an endorsement — and says plainly whose problem that now is: the generation of the people watching, and of his own grandchildren.

“I am in a mood of lamentation. Lamentation for my generation, for the Americans, for the younger generation, for the whole world.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • THIRTY PER CENT, AND WHAT GREW FROM IT

The comparison he reaches for is the one everybody reaches for, and he uses it more carefully than most — as an argument about proportions rather than about equivalence.

Hitler, he says, never won more than about a third of German voters. And the seeds planted then sprouted, germinated and are traceable today in one form or another in populism around the world. His point is what follows: if a third produced that, what should be expected of a share approaching half?

Then the passage that gives the section its weight, and which explains the register of the whole broadcast. The first president he ever met was Kennedy, at the age of twenty, in 1962. For his entire adult life the civilisation he navigated by was the American one.

So the analogy he ends on is not chosen for drama. Rome did not collapse in a day. It declined — from the empire of Caesar and Augustus to the empire of Nero, who fiddled while the city burned.

“Hitler never won more than a third of German voters, and the seeds he planted have sprouted all over the world. This was nearly half.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • NOT THE COLLEGE. THE WHOLE APPARATUS.

On the electoral college he refers back to his own earlier verdict — an anachronism — and to the hope he had attached to it: that a decisive result, with large majorities in both chambers and in the states, would have made a revisit possible.

But the argument has widened since he last made it, and this is the new part. What these three days show is not that one institution is out of date; it is that the whole American electoral apparatus is.

His evidence is a list, and it is difficult to answer. A country that went to the moon and has satellites overhead is counting ballots by hand. Counties within the same state operate different rules about when a postal ballot may be opened and at what hour.

What angers him is the commentary rather than the machinery. He watches American pundits revelling in the county-by-county peculiarities — this county has that rule — and says they should be

ashamed. Were this happening anywhere else, those same pundits would be calling it unacceptable and disgraceful. Not one of them, in three days, has said that the country cannot go on like this.

His conclusion is stated as a correction of a phrase then in wide circulation. This is not the process working. This is the process having broken down. And the risk he names is not collapse but indifference: a time will come when people decide they do not really care, and move on to other things. The United States remains powerful economically and militarily. It is no longer great in the currency he is talking about, which is admiration.

“The process is working? Excuse me. The process has broken down.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • FEDERALISM DOES NOT REQUIRE THIS

A viewer makes the federalist case: is state control of state elections not exactly the devolution that restructuring elsewhere is meant to achieve?

He grants it immediately, and then draws the line where he thinks it belongs. State offices, yes — governors, mayors, city councils, whatever rules and processes a state finds suits it.

But the presidency is a national office. For a national office there should be a uniform process, and he does not accept that uniform electoral law — laid down by Congress or established by the Supreme Court — is in any way antithetical to federalism.

The formulation he ends on is the one worth keeping, because it is the practical test rather than the constitutional one: the election of the most powerful office in the world should not turn on which county you happened to post your ballot in.

“A uniform electoral law for a national office is not antithetical to true federalism. States can keep their own rules for state offices.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 • SEVEN CITIES, AND A COUNTING HALL

Pressed on the claim that the absence of major unrest proves the system's resilience, he objects to the tense. As of the last count, he says, there are demonstrations in seven major American cities — and in at least one, pro-Trump demonstrators pushed into a counting hall.

The mechanism he identifies is the one that gets least attention: the people doing the actual counting can hear the noise outside, and are working under that pressure. Count the votes, don't count the votes, shouted through a window at officials handling ballots.

So his answer to what are you waiting for is blunt. Are we waiting for riots? Every additional day empowers the street to take over a process that is supposed to be working.

And he makes a point about his own eye that is worth noting, because it is what a lifetime of watching this country produces. He is not used to seeing demonstrators on American streets as part of a post-electoral process. That novelty is itself the finding.

“The longer this takes, the longer you empower the streets to take over the process you think is working.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 • HOW DELAY BECOMES THE OBJECTIVE

Asked whether the incumbent could still find a route, he says theoretically yes, and then sets out the mechanics rather than the arithmetic — which is why the section matters more now than it did then.

The strategy, as he reads it, is to throw a great many cases at a great many courts. More than two hundred federal judges were appointed during the term, and some of those cases will land in front of some of them. One injunction anywhere stops a count somewhere. Then the appeal, then the state supreme court, then the federal one — and at each stage the clock runs.

His precedent is the obvious one and he uses it to isolate the variable that has changed. In 2000 the United States did not know its president until December. But neither candidate appealed to the streets. Here, one of them has been priming supporters who carry guns, and would encourage them.

Which produces the prediction he states in both directions, and it should be read as a warning rather than a wish. If the incumbent somehow prevails, he expects liberals to accept it, because not resorting to other means is part of what liberalism is. If it goes the other way, he expects blood on American streets.

And then the conclusion the chart is built around, and the sharpest thing in the broadcast: he may lose every case and still get what he came for. Uncertainty raises the temperature; a delayed and contested declaration corrodes the legitimacy of whoever takes office; and a new president may be confronted from the first day with putting down violence. The Professor is careful to say he cannot be certain — and equally careful to say he is not certain this is not the point.



The chain he traces, in which losing the cases is not the same as failing.

07 • NOTHING WRONG WITH THE RULES

Asked, as a former member of Nigeria's electoral reform committee, what is wrong with the world's electoral systems, he refuses the premise in one line: there is nothing wrong with the electoral process. There is a great deal wrong with politicians who will not play by the rules.

His evidence is a tour of that fortnight and he wishes the moderator had included more of it. In Uganda, a candidate arrested while submitting his declaration of interest, his car vandalised to pull him out of it — done in front of cameras, because the people doing it knew whose cover they had. In Tanzania, opposition figures arrested after the vote. In Ethiopia, fighter aircraft over a province, in his phrase, bombing your own people over an electoral matter. In Côte d'Ivoire, streets turned into theatres between police, military and opposition supporters.

The institutional complaint returns, and it is the same one he made a fortnight earlier. ECOWAS is now appealing to opposition leaders to sit down with a government that engineered a constitutional

amendment to allow a third term — after two terms had become an African norm. Nobody told that government it was looking for trouble while it was amending the constitution. Now that the trouble has arrived, the appeal goes to the opposition.

And he closes the argument by refusing to exempt the country he has spent the evening mourning. The same inconsistency is on display in Washington: keep counting where I lead, stop counting where I trail. No consistency, no principle — and he treats that as the same disease, not a different one.

“Continue counting where I am leading; stop counting where I am behind. No consistency. No principles. It is that simple.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

08 • NO LIGHT ON THE HILL

A viewer puts it directly: has the United States lost the moral right to lecture anyone about elections? He answers by pointing at his own choice of word. He began the programme lamenting the decline of American civilisation, and used decline deliberately rather than fall.

It will not stop the sermons, he says. It will empty them of credibility. Nobody talks back to a superpower, but the body language will show it — and he offers both a Yoruba proverb about minding your own business and the scriptural instruction about the beam in your own eye.

The second half of the question is the harder one, and his answer is the bleakest sentence in the archive. Asked who we look to now, he considers the only competing civilisation on offer, notes that it is not a democracy, and concludes that as far as democracy is concerned there is at present no light on the hill at all.

“There is no light on the hill. No light at all, to give the ship of democracy a bearing.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

09 • FOUR THINGS ANY SYSTEM SHOULD DO

Asked what he would change, he declines to prescribe across different countries and gives principles instead — the closest thing in the archive to his own electoral charter.

Register everyone entitled to vote. And then a preference he flags as one he is not certain he would press: he has an affinity for the Australian arrangement, where voting is compulsory and failing to do it attracts a fine. His reason is a duty rather than a right — it is your responsibility to have a hand in how you are ruled.

Count every vote, and do not put technical difficulties in the way of counting votes already cast.

Make the whole process transparent, and let the winner take office promptly.

And the fourth, which is the one he has watched fail most often: the judiciary must not be used to deny the credibility of a result. Politicians always find a gimmick; in a good many countries the bench has been compromised, judgments have reversed plainly legitimate results, and the loser has been installed.

“It is your responsibility to have a hand in how you are ruled.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

10 • PUNCHING ABOVE THE WEIGHT

On the British foreign secretary calling for fresh elections in Belarus, he is briskly deflationary. The man in Minsk will not lose any sleep over it — the European Union took the same position more than a month earlier.

The diagnosis is about standing rather than about the merits. Britain is attempting to punch above its weight; had it remained inside the Union, the same call would have carried as part of a credible whole.

He calls it a pity, and treats it as an early illustration of a general problem about the country's foreign policy reach rather than a comment on this one statement.

“Inside the Union, the same call would have been part of a credible whole. On its own, it is punching above its weight.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

11 · DO NOT BLAME THE TRAINERS

Asked whether Britain deserves criticism for having trained officers of the disbanded Nigerian police unit, he says no, twice, and then makes an argument that is more interesting than the exoneration.

Britain could reasonably argue that it took part precisely to ensure a modicum of behaviour. If the people trained forget the training when they get home, that is not a condemnation of the training.

His evidence is the strongest available and it is domestic. The same Nigerian police and soldiers earn excellent records on United Nations and African Union peacekeeping operations — he notes that a Nigerian policewoman had just taken an African Union award for performance beyond the call of duty. Same people, different setting, different conduct.

So the variable is not the training. It is the system they return to, and that is where he says the focus belongs. He allows the obvious exception — if there were evidence they had been trained to be vicious, to violate rights, to be animals in uniform, then the training would be the issue. And he makes the point by inversion: if they had been sent to be trained by forces notorious for brutality, we would be entitled to say we had gone looking for what we got.

“The same men win awards on peacekeeping operations. It is the system they come back to. That is where our focus should be.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

12 · A CONSTITUTION THAT ALREADY ANSWERED THE QUESTION

On air strikes in Tigray, he sets the continental risk aside quickly — copycats are a danger anywhere a government gets away with bombing its own population — and says the repercussions for Ethiopia itself are more horrendous than for anyone else.

His bewilderment is constitutional. Ethiopia went through a vicious civil war, came to the conference table, and by mutual consent saw Eritrea leave. And its constitution states plainly that a province wishing to break away may do so, subject to conditions. The steps for a region with grievances are written down.

So how it reached the bombing of a province is, he says, beyond him.

The closing observation is institutional and awkward for the continent. Addis Ababa is the seat of the African Union. It reflects on the Union if the country housing it degenerates into another civil war.

“The constitution already addresses what you do if you have grievances. How this got to bombing a province is beyond me.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

13 • QUID PRO QUO

On the removal of Sudan from the American list of state sponsors of terrorism, he gives the case for it fairly and at length before saying what he thinks is actually going on.

The case: there is a new government, itself the product of a revolution rather than a continuation of the old one, and it is bringing the former president and senior officials to book. There was a period when Sudan permitted terrorists to operate from its territory — bin Laden lived there before Afghanistan. And Sudan has agreed to pay compensation for American lives lost. On that basis Washington may reasonably take them at their word until they give reason to do otherwise.

His own reading, offered as an inference and not as a finding, is that the sequence explains itself. The driver is the normalisation policy with Israel rather than the reparations or the record. He calls it, plainly, a quid pro quo.

“I think the policy of reconciliation with Israel is more behind this than the reparations. It is a quid pro quo.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

14 • FIFTY YEARS

The closing exchange returns to the courts, and to what the litigation is actually for. In most legal systems you begin at the bottom and work up, and at each stage everything stops once the other side indicates an appeal. That, he says, is a delay tactic — and delay generates uncertainty, and uncertainty raises the level of stress and of violence, particularly when the violence is being encouraged from the White House.

So it may never reach the Supreme Court at all. He may lose, and still have destroyed the legitimacy of the man who takes office — who could find himself, from day one, putting down violence in the streets. And the Professor repeats the sentence he cannot quite bring himself to soften: he is not certain that this is not what was wanted.

The last thing he says is the reason this issue exists. Whatever happens in January, this does not leave with the man. The seeds sown in America will be with Americans for another fifty years — because that is how long the last set took to stop sprouting.

“Even if he leaves the White House in January, what has been sown in America will be with the Americans for the next fifty years.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- He mourns the size of the losing vote rather than the identity of the winner. Is that the right thing to measure — and what would a reassuring number have looked like?
- A uniform national law for a national office sounds obvious and would require the states to give something up. Which of them would, and in exchange for what?

- If losing every case still achieves the objective, litigation has become a tool for something courts cannot correct. What institution is supposed to answer that?
- Compulsory voting turns a right into a duty. Does it produce better governments, or simply more complete numbers?
- The same officers behave well abroad and badly at home. What exactly is the system doing to them on return, and which part of it would you change first?

Watch Session 23 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. The vote figures he cites are running totals as they stood on the evening of 5 November: the final count gave the incumbent about 74.2 million votes, or 46.8 per cent, rather than the 67 to 68 million and 49.5 per cent available that night. Two other corrections: the highest share the Nazi party took in a free German election was 37.3 per cent in July 1932, so his “not more than thirty per cent” understates it; and the Electoral College was created by the Constitutional Convention of 1787 rather than in 1776. His prediction of violence is reported as the warning he framed it as. The reading of the Sudan decision as a quid pro quo is his inference; the chronology he rests it on is accurate.

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