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with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

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FROM THE ARCHIVE · FOREIGN POLICY

WHO'S ACTUALLY IN CHARGE

A mutiny that nearly reached Moscow, a NATO post withheld from London — this week is about what happens when the chain of command blurs.

Session 146 · Thursday 29 June 2023

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FROM THE ARCHIVE

Who's Actually In Charge

From a Kremlin mutiny that exposed who really controls Russia's guns, to a NATO post withheld from London, to nine judges disagreeing in public — this week keeps testing what happens when the chain of command gets murky.

An episode built almost entirely around control — who has it, who's losing it, and what happens when the answer stops being clear. It opens with a mutiny that nearly reached Moscow and closes in a courtroom disagreement about who a government is allowed to send where. **Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi applies the same test throughout: to a militia whose orders no longer trace cleanly back to anyone, to a NATO post withheld from a would-be ally still adjusting to Brexit, and to judges who disagree in public without discrediting one another.**

An archive edition, recorded 29 June 2023, days after the Wagner Group's mutiny in Russia. Events and figures are described as they stood that week.

01 · A TIGER, AN ONION, AND A COUP THAT ALMOST WORKED

The session opens on the Wagner mutiny. Prof. Akinyemi declines to offer certainty about what actually happened inside the Kremlin — Russia, he says, is "like an onion: you peel one layer, there's another" — but reaches for a line he says he's used on this platform before: you should never climb onto the back of a tiger, because the only way to dismount is to end up inside it. On his account, Putin built Wagner as a counterweight to his own army, much as Sudan's president built the RSF as insurance against his military, and didn't expect the tool to turn on its owner.

He's careful about scale: Wagner, he argues, could never have defeated the regular Russian army in open combat. The real danger, on his telling, was the silence of regular troops watching Wagner's columns advance to within 200 kilometers of Moscow unopposed — a hesitation he reads as evidence the Kremlin itself wasn't certain its own army wouldn't fracture. He draws an explicit parallel to 1917, when it was disoriented troops returning from the front, not committed revolutionaries, who turned on the Tsar.

“You should never write on the back of a tiger, because the only way to dismount is to end up inside the tiger.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

HOW A MILITIA BECOMES UNGOVERNABLE

THE PROFESSOR'S READING OF THE WAGNER MUTINY



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How a militia becomes ungovernable, per the Professor's reading of the Wagner mutiny.

02 · STATE-BACKED MILITIAS, AND THE EXIT NOBODY CAN NEGOTIATE

Prompted by reports of Moscow saying African states can use Wagner "however they want," Prof. Akinyemi poses a question of his own: what happens to a militia once no one can say who gives its orders? Calling Wagner mercenaries always undersold it, on his account, because it took orders from Moscow — a real chain of command. Now that the chain is unclear, he argues, "you really have a mercenary group on your hands," a force without a knowable center.

That should worry the African governments hosting Wagner units, he says, because security dependence means simply asking the group to leave — the way Mali asked France, or is asking the UN — isn't a real option if the answer comes back as a refusal on the host's own soil.

“Now that we don't know who is giving orders to the various Wagner troops — whether in Mali, Libya, Sudan, or the Central African Republic — you really have a mercenary group on your hands.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 · MINSK'S PRICE, AND A NEW FRONT 200KM FROM KYIV

Belarus's Lukashenko brokered the deal that sent Wagner's leadership into exile, but Prof. Akinyemi reads the intervention as self-interest rather than generosity: Belarus's own stability, he argues, is bound to Russia's, and a fragmenting Russia would have threatened Lukashenko's own grip on power — a debt he says Moscow already collected once, when Russia helped him survive a contested election. He's candid that he doesn't know how the arrangement resolves: whether Minsk can actually contain the Wagner units it's now hosting, or whether they instead open a new front

against Ukraine from bases he says satellite imagery shows being built barely 200 kilometers from the border.

On whether Kyiv capitalized on Moscow's turmoil, he pushes back gently on the premise: twenty-four hours, he argues, is too short a window for any general staff to meaningfully redeploy, though he allows the episode may still be denting Russian frontline morale.

04 · WHITEHALL'S POST, AND THE BILL FOR BREXIT

The conversation turns to reports that Washington blocked the UK's defense secretary from becoming NATO's next Secretary General. Prof. Akinyemi's read is blunt: the "special relationship" was always more a British narrative than an American one, and this, on his account, is Washington saying so without saying so. He frames the European resistance as sharper still — France and Germany, he says, argued the post should go to an undiluted EU member, telling London it "has not come to terms with the mistake it made on Brexit."

He connects this to Britain's outsized support for Ukraine, including Storm Shadow missiles, floating — without fully endorsing — the idea that a British NATO chief might have read as escalatory, before returning to his central point: leaving the EU, he argues, cost Britain a form of standing it hasn't priced in.

"Brexit has consequences, and I think this is one of them."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

05 · A THIRD SUITOR FOR THE MIDDLE EAST'S ATTENTION

A shorter item on Israel's Prime Minister announcing a China visit, paired with a statement that the US "still remains a key ally." Prof. Akinyemi reads it as positioning: with China having brokered detente between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Israel wants its own line of communication to Beijing, rather than watch the region's diplomacy move around it. Proximity to Riyadh and Tehran, on his account, isn't enough on its own for China to treat the Middle East as settled — Israel intends to remain a party any regional deal has to account for.

06 · NINE JUDGES, ONE RULING, AND HOW HISTORY GETS ERASED

On the US Supreme Court's ruling against race-conscious university admissions, Prof. Akinyemi argues the court "got it wrong." His reasoning: race, on his account, only ever entered a decision after qualification thresholds were already met, and the ruling treats every applicant as having started from the same position — ignoring, he says, a history of exclusion running from slavery through the era affirmative action was designed to answer.

He's careful to separate disagreement from delegitimizing the bench: he says he holds the six-judge majority in no way dishonorable, even while noting the irony that Justice Clarence Thomas, who benefited from affirmative action himself, voted to end it for others — "like he got to where he got to, then pulled up the ladder."

"For the Supreme Court to have ignored this, and assume that every group started on the same level playing field — to me, that is to misread American history."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · RESPECTFUL DISSENT, AND A PATTERN THAT KEEPS REPEATING

The episode closes on a UK Court of Appeal ruling — decided two to one — that Rwanda isn't a safe and proper place for Britain to send asylum seekers. Prof. Akinyemi uses the split decision to make a broader point about how disagreement with judges ought to be conducted: with respect for the

institution and the individuals on both sides of a vote, even when the reasoning looks political from the outside.

He then turns, more carefully, to the police shooting of a 17-year-old in France, framing it explicitly as his own reading of systemic racism rather than a verdict on that specific case — evidence, in his view, of a pattern that a society built on centuries of racial suspicion doesn't shed "overnight."

"When judges disagree with us, or we disagree with judges, we should be careful to ensure we don't destroy the institution in expressing that disagreement."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- If a state-backed militia's chain of command becomes untraceable, does hosting it become more dangerous than tolerating it — and does "mercenary" even remain the right word?
- Is Belarus's hosting of Wagner an act of loyalty to Moscow or a hedge against its own vulnerability — and does the answer change what Minsk does next?
- Does blocking one ally's bid for a NATO post send a sharper message than any communiqué could, and if so, what is Washington actually telling London?
- Can an originalist reading of admissions law account for a harm that predates every plaintiff currently in the room?
- Can an institution preserve public trust in judicial dissent without flattening disagreement or treating the losing side as illegitimate?

Watch Session 146 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

More analysis: tmeinsights.com · profbolajiakinyemi.com

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