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with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

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FROM THE ARCHIVE · FOREIGN POLICY

WHAT DOESN'T STAY DOWN

A Wagner commander back in Saint Petersburg, a base no indictment can shake — this week is about the things that refuse to stay buried.

Session 147 · Thursday 6 July 2023

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FROM THE ARCHIVE

What Doesn't Stay Down

From a Wagner commander back in Saint Petersburg to a base no indictment can shake, this week keeps circling the same question: what actually stays buried, and what just waits out the news cycle.

An episode about the things that refuse to resolve — a mutiny's leader reappearing in the city he was supposedly exiled from, a base of voters unmoved by scandal or indictment, a country that keeps setting itself on fire over the same grievances. **Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi returns to each of these as evidence for the same argument: power and loyalty rarely disappear on schedule, and the institutions built to manage them are often improvising as much as anyone watching.**

An archive edition, recorded 6 July 2023. Events and figures are described as they stood that week.

01 · AN ONION WITH NO BOTTOM, AND A WAGNER MAN BACK IN SAINT PETERSBURG

The session opens on news breaking mid-broadcast: the Wagner Group's leader, reportedly exiled to Belarus weeks earlier, is back in Saint Petersburg — Putin's own hometown. Prof. Akinyemi declines to offer a clean explanation, returning to the metaphor he'd used two weeks prior: Russia as an onion with no final layer. On his account, he doesn't know whether the exile deal collapsed, whether Putin changed his calculus, or whether Wagner's leader is testing who actually commands public loyalty.

He reads the visible signs as contradictory: state television showing security police raiding the man's mansion — cash, weapons, disguises — while the man himself apparently walks free in the city his patron calls home. What he's more confident about, on his account, is that several senior Russian

military officials linked to the mutiny have quietly stopped appearing at their posts, and that ordinary Russians treated Wagner's leader less like a traitor than "a Robin Hood."

"Russia is like an onion — you peel one layer, and there's another layer waiting for you. You never really get to the bottom."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 • A WOMAN FOR NATO, AND THE CEILING SHE'S ALREADY CRACKED

With the UK's bid for NATO's top job blocked, attention turns to a different candidate: a former German defense minister now leading the European Commission. Prof. Akinyemi reads Washington's shift toward her as sound on the merits — Germany's arms and financial support for Ukraine, he argues, has earned real credit — while noting the timing: NATO's outgoing chief has had his term extended by a year, on his account to let her candidacy mature.

He's frank about the resistance she's already faced: at a delegation event in Greece, he recalls, every seated chair went to a man, leaving her standing until officials scrambled to fix it — "an embarrassment," he says, "not for her, but for the men in that delegation."

"That was quite an embarrassment — and not for her, but for the men who were on that delegation."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

03 • A GAG ORDER THE PROFESSOR DOESN'T EXPECT TO SURVIVE

A US district court injunction barring the White House from pressuring social media platforms to remove content draws a confident prediction: Prof. Akinyemi says it will be overturned on appeal, grounding his argument in a near-absolute reading of American free speech protections, with the sole carve-out being speech that endangers lives — the doctrine, as he cites it, against falsely shouting fire in a crowded theatre.

He frames the ruling itself as a departure from settled precedent rather than a plausible reading of it, though he's candid that he finds the underlying judgment difficult to follow.

"There will be no inhibition to free speech — it is that absolute."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

04 • AN ADDRESS, AN ARREST, AND A BASE THAT WON'T MOVE

Reports that Trump posted a former president's home address, followed shortly by an armed man's arrest near that address, draw a sharp rebuke. Prof. Akinyemi calls the act reckless on its own terms — a former president under Secret Service protection, endangered by another former president's post — while noting the double standard: Trump himself, he says, has never hidden the location of his own properties.

What strikes him more, on his account, is the total absence of consequence: Trump's ratings kept climbing through the disclosure, consistent with what he calls Trump's own earlier boast about shooting someone on a New York street and losing no supporters. Multiple pending indictments, in his reading, haven't dented a base that doesn't need him to campaign at all.

"Nothing that Trump will do will shake that base."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

HOW A POLITICAL BASE BECOMES INDICTMENT-PROOF

THE PROFESSOR'S READING OF THE TRUMP CASE



Session 147 · What Doesn't Stay Down

Syncterface Media

How a political base becomes indictment-proof, per the Professor's reading of the Trump case.

05 · IS IT PERSECUTION? WHAT THE SPECIAL PROSECUTOR ACTUALLY DID

Pressed by an audience member on whether the Trump and Hunter Biden prosecutions are politically motivated, Prof. Akinyemi lays out the special-counsel mechanism as his answer: a prosecutor formally insulated from the Department of Justice, in Trump's case a Trump appointee himself, evaluates the evidence independently. He points to a detail he treats as evidence of fairness rather than bias: prosecutors chose to try the classified-documents case in Florida — friendlier jury territory for Trump — rather than in Washington, DC, where the alleged conduct occurred.

On Hunter Biden, he lays out the plea agreement's terms (a guilty plea to a lesser tax charge, a diversion program for the firearms count) alongside Hunter's account of childhood trauma — his mother and sister killed in a crash when he was a toddler — without treating that background as an excuse, and concludes that being the president's son bought no special treatment either way.

"This is not a third-world country. You cannot ascribe political persecution to what is happening to Trump unless you have information the rest of us don't."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

06 · FAILURE IS UNIVERSAL, EXCEPT WHEN THE PRICE IS A FIRING SQUAD

A failed North Korean satellite launch, its debris recovered and assessed by US and South Korean experts as having no real military value, becomes a broader point about the ordinariness of technical failure. Prof. Akinyemi sets it beside Virgin Galactic's failed rocket test and the Titan submersible disaster from weeks earlier — evidence, on his account, that no nation's research and development is exempt from setbacks.

What he singles out isn't the failure itself but the propaganda gap it exposes: North Korea's habitual claims of unmatched technical achievement, he argues, don't survive contact with an actual inspection. His closing worry is for the engineers involved, given what a failed launch has historically cost scientists in that system.

"We've just found out that it is so much bluff — the emperor has no clothes on."

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

07 · A PENDULUM, A BONFIRE, AND THE POISON THEY STILL USE

Two audience questions push the conversation toward Western populism and its effects on Africa. Prof. Akinyemi traces the electoral swing toward the right, in Britain, France, and the US, to migration driven by Western-led destabilization in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and beyond — and argues the

resulting policies end up working against the same working-class voters who elected them, a cycle he expects to swing back left before it swings right again. On France's recurring unrest, he offers his own characterization — "a culture of anarchism" dating to the revolution — while flagging it explicitly as his own reading rather than settled sociology, and citing the pension-reform riots and a fatal police shooting as recent flashpoints.

Asked how nationalist African leaders can be protected from external interference, he's unusually candid that he doesn't have a clean answer: poisoning ("the favorite French method"), coups, and assassination have repeatedly removed leaders who tried to keep national wealth at home, and he argues Africa's own internal divisions — ethnic and regional — are what outside powers exploit to keep it that way. He illustrates the point by contrasting how a Western scholar's book treated a Nigerian leader's death versus an American president's own scandals, calling out what he sees as a double standard in whose flaws get read as national pathology.

"How do we protect nationalist leaders from being poisoned — the favorite French method — from being overthrown — the favorite American and British method — or from being assassinated?"

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

THREADS TO PULL

- If exile doesn't actually remove a warlord from the capital, what did the deal that ended the mutiny actually buy Moscow?
- Does trying a case in a friendlier jury pool undermine or protect the legitimacy of a prosecution meant to look neutral?
- If working-class voters keep electing parties whose policies work against them, is the "pendulum" theory of politics a comfort or a cop-out?
- Can a scholar's own characterization of a country's political culture become an unfalsifiable stereotype, even when offered as a personal reading?
- If nationalist African leaders keep being undermined by poison, coup, or assassination, what would actually need to change for the pattern to break?

Watch Session 147 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

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