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with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

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FROM THE ARCHIVE · FOREIGN POLICY

THROUGH THE BACK DOOR

A Hajj crisis, solved by a phone call to the King of Morocco —
this week traces the diplomacy embassies can't do.

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Session 166 — the channels embassies can't use.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

Through The Back Door

From a Hajj crisis defused by a phone call to the King of Morocco to a Zulu king asked to stand down, this week traces how Africa's palaces move issues embassies can't.

An episode split cleanly in two: a brisk, familiar segment on Britain's Supreme Court rejecting the government's Rwanda deportation plan, and then a full hour handed over to a rotating panel of Nigerian royal fathers and career ambassadors describing, in granular first-hand detail, the diplomacy that never touches a foreign ministry letterhead. **The panel's case studies span three decades and two continents, but Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi's own conclusion arrives only at the end: this is an institution Nigeria has never systematically used, and probably should.**

On the panel: a prince of the Zazzau royal family and Nigerian ambassador to Thailand; a traditional titleholder from Kano and former Foreign Service officer; the chairman of the Southeast Council of Traditional Rulers and former acting OAU Secretary-General; Ambassador Godknows Igali, former Nigerian ambassador to Sweden; and other career ambassadors joining by voice. Several names and titles were not clearly recoverable from the broadcast audio and are flagged for confirmation.

An archive edition, recorded 16 November 2023, in the same week Britain's Supreme Court blocked the Rwanda deportation scheme. Events and figures are described as they stood that week. This is the first of a two-part discussion; a fuller panel was expected to continue it the following week.

01 · BRITAIN'S TOP COURT SAYS NO TO RWANDA. THE PRIME MINISTER SAYS HE'LL OVERRULE IT ANYWAY.

The session opens on the UK's cabinet reshuffle and, more pointedly, on the Supreme Court's unanimous five-judge ruling that the government's plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda is

unlawful. Prof. Akinyemi calls the unanimity itself notable, pushing back on a colleague's suggestion that judges disagreeing would somehow be more credible. What troubles him far more, on his account, is the Prime Minister's public threat to legislate around the ruling — and, if that fails, to withdraw Britain from the European Court of Human Rights entirely.

He reads the whole episode as self-inflicted: European governments destabilized Libya against Gaddafi's own warning that he was the region's gatekeeper against migration, and are now, on his account, prepared to hollow out human rights protections domestically rather than absorb the consequences. His conclusion is blunt — if the Global North treats human rights as negotiable when inconvenient, the Global South has every reason to insist on them as non-negotiable.

“If the Supreme Court says this is it, then that is it. We had better start appealing to God to save us from politicians who think they know better than their own human rights obligations.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · CONVENING THE PALACE: THIS ISSUE'S ROYAL PANEL

The second half of the broadcast is handed to a panel arranged at short notice: several Nigerian traditional rulers and the ambassadors who have worked alongside them, joining by voice to discuss whether royal fathers have a role in Nigeria's foreign policy that career diplomacy cannot fill. The premise, as the moderator frames it, is specific: not traditional rulers as career officers, but as traditional rulers — able to speak ruler-to-ruler, without the protocol that constrains an embassy, and to carry recommendations back to government through channels a foreign ministry cannot open.

03 · A HAJJ CRISIS, A PHONE CALL TO MOROCCO, AND A 1996 WAGER THAT WORKED

The panel's sharpest case study comes from a former protocol officer to the late General Sani Abacha: in 1995–96, Nigeria was effectively barred from that year's Hajj over a dispute with Saudi Arabia — a serious matter in the north, on his account, given the Hajj's religious weight. He proposed sending the Emir of Zazzau to appeal directly to the King of Morocco, banking on the closeness between the Moroccan and Saudi royal families. Abacha approved it; the delegation flew to Morocco, the king intervened before they'd even returned to Nigeria, and the Hajj suspension was lifted — a resolution reached, on this account, faster than conventional diplomatic channels had managed.

“The king never hesitated, and expressed willingness to intervene — which he did before our return to Nigeria.”

— A panelist, on the 1996 Morocco mission

ROYAL DIPLOMACY, A PARTIAL RECORD

FROM THE PANEL'S OWN CASE STUDIES



Session 166 • Through The Back Door

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A partial timeline of royal diplomacy, drawn from the panel's own case studies — dates approximate, per the panelists' recollection.

04 • SAME YEAR, TWO STATE VISITS: GAMBIA'S ECONOMY AND ALGERIA'S PIPELINE

The same panelist describes two more recent state visits made in the same year: a trip to The Gambia, where the visiting Nigerian royal was named guest of honor at the country's independence anniversary and met privately with the Gambian president to discuss trade and security cooperation, and a visit to Algeria for a conference honoring a historical Islamic scholar, where President Abdelmadjid Tebboune reportedly used the bulk of the audience to discuss closer Nigeria-Algeria-South Africa cooperation, including a trans-Saharan gas pipeline. Both visits produced reports relayed directly to the Nigerian government and foreign ministry, on his account — informal in form, but substantive in content.

05 • AN OONI IN CUBA, A QUEEN INSIDE THE HAREM

Other panelists widen the aperture south and across the Atlantic. One recalls accompanying the Ooni of Ife to Brazil and Cuba, where Fidel Castro himself came to the airport to receive him — a level of public deference, on his account, rooted in shared history with Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban communities whose ancestors were taken in the slave trade, and who he says preserve older Yoruba vocabulary better than Nigeria itself does. A separate anecdote recounts Queen Elizabeth II, on an early visit to Kano, being permitted into the inner chamber of the Emir's palace ordinarily reserved for women — apparently the only occasion, per the story as told, that she went anywhere without her security detail.

A third panelist, formerly Nigeria's ambassador to Benin, describes being received by twenty-three Obas from the Benin Republic on arrival, and later using his personal ties to traditional rulers to free Nigerian customs officers detained and nearly executed on mistaken suspicion of being Boko Haram fighters — resolved, on his account, without any formal diplomatic correspondence at all.

06 • SWEDEN'S QUIET DIPLOMACY, AND A ZULU KING ASKED TO STAND DOWN

Ambassador Godknows Igali, formerly Nigeria's envoy to Scandinavia, describes European monarchies running a comparable back channel: Sweden's king told him that Nordic royal houses regularly deploy "people of royal standing" to countries with their own monarchies — Spain, Belgium, the UK — when diplomacy turns delicate, and that Norway's king does the same in mediating global disputes largely out of public view.

He also recounts South Africa's mid-2010s xenophobic violence against African migrants, when President Goodluck Jonathan, under appeal from South Africa's president not to retaliate, reportedly

turned first to a prominent Nigerian traditional ruler to appeal directly to the implicated Zulu monarch — on the premise that a ruler-to-ruler message carried weight a diplomatic protest could not.

“When there are naughty issues in diplomacy, the Prime Minister tasks the king to deploy people of royal standing.”

— Ambassador Godknows Igali, recounting Sweden's king

07 · A PROPOSAL: PUT THE COUNCIL INSIDE THE AFRICAN UNION

The panel converges on a concrete recommendation from a career ambassador: that the African Union's underused "Panel of the Wise" be replaced, or supplemented, with a formally instituted council of traditional rulers, replicated at the national level — his term for it is "M-democracy." Prof. Akinyemi, candid that he began the discussion skeptical, ends it persuaded: the institution has been sitting unused, he concludes, and the respect traditional rulers command across the continent is a resource worth tapping deliberately rather than informally.

THREADS TO PULL

- If a monarch can resolve in days what a foreign ministry couldn't resolve in months, what does that say about where real diplomatic trust actually sits?
- Does the deference traditional rulers command depend on them staying outside formal politics — and would institutionalizing their role inside the AU cost them that leverage?
- If European monarchies already run a quiet parallel diplomatic channel, why has that model never been named or studied the way formal diplomacy has?
- When a government asks a traditional ruler to intervene precisely because it lacks the standing to intervene itself, what does that reveal about the limits of the state's own authority?
- Should Britain's threat to leave the European Court of Human Rights over one ruling change how much moral authority its own human-rights advocacy carries elsewhere?

Watch Session 166 in full on the Syncterface Media channel. New episodes every Thursday, 7pm WAT (7pm UK, 2pm ET).

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