



thruMYeyes

with PROF. BOLAJI AKINYEMI

THE WEEKLY FOREIGN-POLICY BRIEFING

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FROM THE ARCHIVE · FOREIGN POLICY

NO PERMISSION NEEDED

A Lamido ended a 240,000-person refugee crisis with one phone call — no mandate, no blueprint, no one's permission required.

Session 167 · Thursday 23 November 2023

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Session 167 — who has to ask, and who never does.

FROM THE ARCHIVE

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From a Gaza ceasefire brokered by a king who answers to no one to a Lamido who ended a refugee crisis with a phone call, this week asks whose authority to intervene is written down — and whose simply isn't.

Part two of a discussion begun the previous week, opening on live news: the Emir of Qatar's personal role in brokering a Gaza hostage-release deal that sidelined the UN entirely. Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi's panel of traditional rulers and career ambassadors spends the rest of the session testing a single distinction against that example — the difference between a monarch who is a sovereign head of state, and one who can only act once someone in government grants permission. **The panel's most concrete case, offered without prompting, cuts the other way: a Lamido who needed no permission at all to end a 240,000-person refugee crisis with a single phone call.**

On the panel: Ambassador Godknows Igali, a former Nigerian ambassador to Scandinavia and later Cameroon; a traditional ruler and former career ambassador who chairs a regional council of traditional rulers; Ambassador Ahmed Umar, a Kano titleholder and former Foreign Service officer; an academic panelist arguing traditional rulers need no invitation to act; and several other ambassadors and royal fathers joining by voice. A number of names and titles could not be reliably recovered from the broadcast audio and are flagged for confirmation.

An archive edition, recorded 23 November 2023, the day before a Qatar-brokered Israel-Hamas humanitarian pause and hostage exchange was due to take effect. Events and figures are described as they stood that week. This is the second of (at least) two linked sessions on the role of traditional rulers in foreign affairs; see the previous issue for part one.

01 · A CEASEFIRE BROKERED BY A KING WHO ANSWERS TO NO ONE

The session opens on breaking news: a Gaza humanitarian pause and hostage exchange, due to take effect the next morning, personally brokered by the Emir of Qatar working alongside Egypt and the United States. Prof. Akinyemi is unsparing about what the deal actually is — four days of ceasefire, after which, on his account, the bombing resumes — and about what it says that the United Nations was sidelined entirely in favor of one monarch's personal diplomacy. He credits the Emir's effort while questioning what exactly the world is celebrating.

The episode becomes the panel's opening exhibit for the rest of the night: Qatar's Emir is a genuine head of state, with no separation between crown and government, free to negotiate without asking anyone's leave. Nigeria's traditional rulers, on the panel's repeated account, are not.

“What have we gained, that we celebrate feeding people for four days before the bombing starts again? We should examine our own souls.”

— Prof. Bolaji Akinyemi

02 · SOVEREIGN VERSUS CEREMONIAL: WHY QATAR'S MODEL DOESN'T TRAVEL

A recurring panelist — himself both a former Foreign Service officer and now a traditional ruler — argues the gap is structural: countries that have written a specific constitutional role for traditional rulers get real diplomatic value from them, while Nigeria's rulers must first secure permission from the state before they can act internationally at all. He points to his own domestic ritual: at every meeting of Nigeria's Traditional Rulers' Council, the group reminds the president that a constitutional role for traditional rulers remains unresolved.

The distinction resurfaced later in a sharper form, when Uganda's total abolition of royalty since the 1960s was offered as the opposite extreme from Qatar, and South Africa's Zulu and Xhosa kings as a middle case — retained and respected within their own kingdoms, but with no national or international mandate at all.

WHO NEEDS PERMISSION TO ACT			
FOUR MONARCHIES, PER THE PANEL'S OWN DISCUSSION			
	NO CONSTITUTIONAL ROLE	SOVEREIGN HEAD OF STATE	
ACTIVE ABROAD	Nigeria No constitutional role, yet a Sultan mediates Niger's crisis and a Lamido ends a refugee crisis alone.	Qatar Head of state and head of government — free to broker a Gaza ceasefire without asking anyone.	
	Uganda Royalty abolished by decree in the 1960s. Never restored, domestically or abroad.	South Africa Zulu and Xhosa kings retain real standing at home, but no mandate to act internationally.	
DOMESTIC ONLY			

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Where four traditional or royal institutions sit on the panel's own terms, per the session's discussion — a qualitative reading, not a ranked score.

03 · THE SULTAN'S MISSION TO NIGER, AND WHAT PERMISSION ACTUALLY BOUGHT

The panel returns to the Sultan of Sokoto's mission to Niger Republic during the ECOWAS crisis, revisiting ground from the previous week with a sharper point: the Sultan traveled only once ECOWAS's chairman gave him a mandate and a blueprint of what he could and could not concede, meaning any goodwill he personally carried was bounded by instructions he didn't set. On the panel's account, the former Emir of Kano — also sent, and received partly because a Nigerian

traditional ruler shared personal ties with him — achieved a process without a resolved outcome: Niger's junta has since gone to the ECOWAS court seeking to lift sanctions rather than accepting the terms on offer. The mission may still have de-escalated tension along the border, even without securing its stated aim.

04 • CAMEROON, 240,000 REFUGEES, AND A LAMIDO'S PHONE CALL

The episode's most concrete counter-example comes from a former Nigerian Consul-General in English-speaking Cameroon: during the period around the ICJ's Bakassi peninsula judgment, roughly 240,000 Nigerian refugees were scattered across Cameroon and refused to come home, not trusting Nigeria's own security services. Nigeria's embassy had no lever to pull — until headquarters advised finding someone the refugees did trust. He approached the Lamido of Adamawa on the Cameroonian side of the border, who personally vouched for their safety to local Fulani leaders; within a month, the entire population returned home after three years away.

No mandate, no blueprint, no permission from any government was needed for that intervention to work — a contrast, on his account, the panel kept circling back to all evening.

“Headquarters was clear: look for people they trust. I approached the Lamido, he vouched for their safety, and within one month we brought that entire population home.”

— A panelist, a former Nigerian Consul-General in Cameroon

05 • A COURTS SYSTEM "ACHING AT THE SEAMS"

Away from foreign policy, one panelist pitches a domestic reform that needs no constitutional amendment at all: formally routing land, marital and some criminal disputes through Obas' palaces as alternative dispute resolution, with any settlement reached there registered afterward as a court consent judgment. His argument is practical rather than romantic — Nigeria's courts, on his account, are overwhelmed to the point of dysfunction, and a palace-brokered settlement that both parties accept costs the judiciary nothing while relieving real pressure.

06 • BRAZIL'S SECOND LINGUA FRANCA, AND AN OPPORTUNITY STILL UNCLAIMED

A shorter exchange revisits Nigeria's cultural ties to Brazil: despite decades-old bilateral agreements and Brazilian universities actively requesting Yoruba-language lecturers, Nigeria's Ministry of Foreign Affairs — depending, on the panelists' account, on how culturally inclined whichever minister happened to be in office — never fully reciprocated. Brazil has since declared Yoruba its second lingua franca alongside Portuguese, a fact the panel treats as evidence of an opportunity Nigeria has left mostly on the table.

07 • AN APOLOGY, A PROMISE, AND A CONFERENCE STILL TO COME

The session closes on a relayed apology from the Sultan and the Emir of Kano, both unable to attend due to a scheduling conflict, with a pledge to help organize an in-person conference on the topic. Prof. Akinyemi, candid that turnout was lighter than he'd hoped, reads the evening as seed-planting rather than resolution — pointing to the Bakassi refugee story and a separate account of unresolved cross-border land disputes with two rival monarchs on either side of the Nigeria-Benin border as evidence that far more of this quiet diplomacy has happened, and continues happening, than the public record shows.

THREADS TO PULL

- If a monarch's diplomatic effectiveness tracks how much sovereign authority he holds at home, does giving traditional rulers a bigger constitutional role actually make them better at cross-border mediation, or just more like ordinary politicians?
- The Lamido who ended a 240,000-person refugee crisis needed no mandate at all — does formalizing a role for traditional rulers risk constraining the exact freedom that made that kind of intervention possible?
- If Nigeria's courts are as overwhelmed as described, does routing disputes through palace consent judgments strengthen the justice system or quietly hollow it out?
- When a cultural opportunity like Yoruba-language exchange with Brazil depends entirely on one minister's personal enthusiasm, what does that say about how seriously an institution takes soft power?
- Does a four-day humanitarian pause that both sides expect to end in renewed bombing deserve to be called a ceasefire at all?

Watch Session 167 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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